

Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

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*Culinary
Chronicles
of the
Court
Flower*

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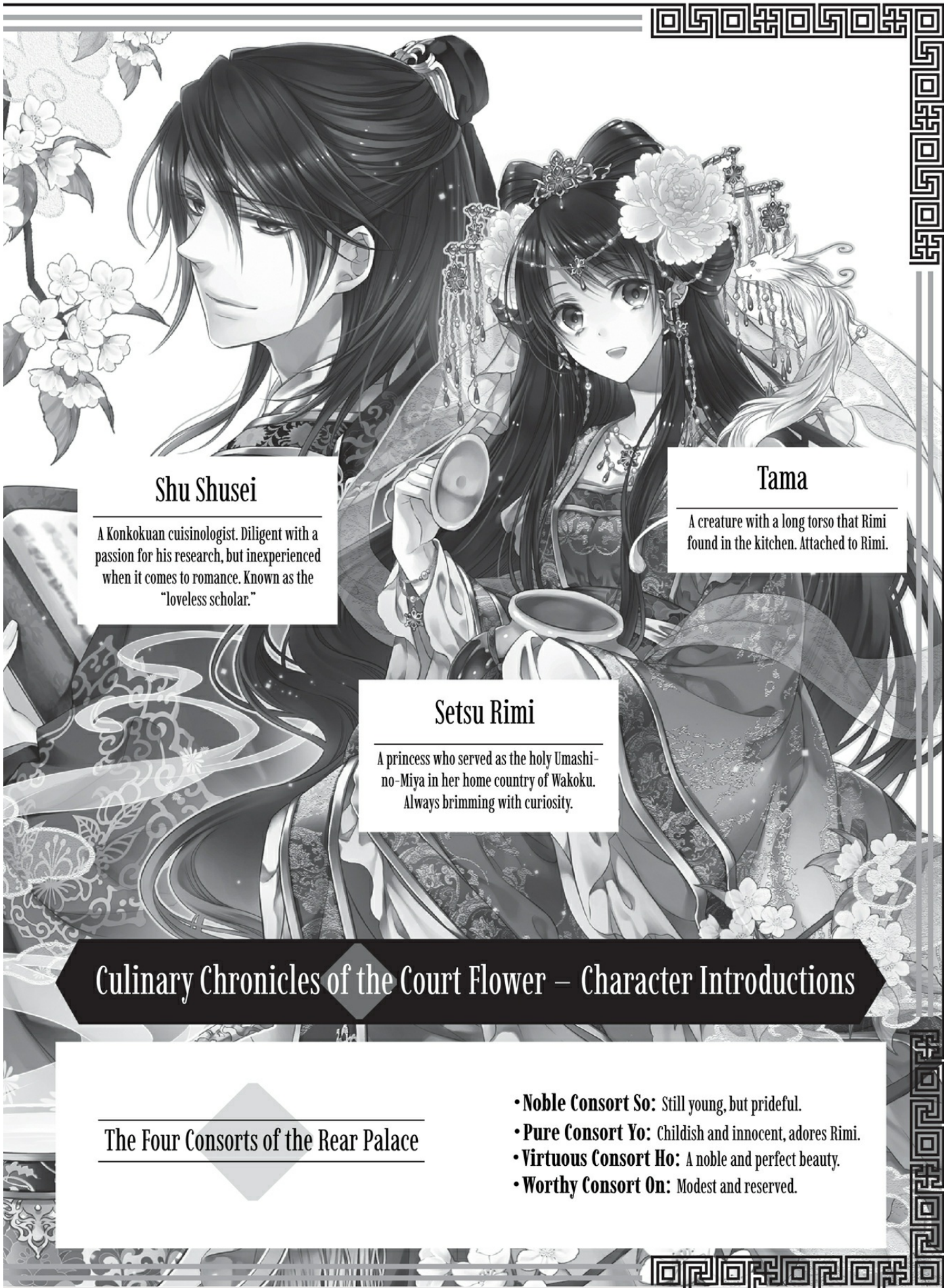
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Shu Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi.

Setsu Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Shin Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Sai Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Ryu Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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It was embarrassment that had caused him to snap.

I should not have acted like that... But there is a limit to what I can take!

The fifth emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, walked briskly as he clenched his teeth. Following a few steps behind him was his imperially appointed bodyguard, Shin Jotetsu. Chancellor Shu Kojin, the Minister of Revenue, and the Minister of Rites, who Shohi had left behind in the consultation chamber, were bound to be astonished by his behavior. They were likely exchanging glances and complaining about how troublesome their emperor was right about now.

“Your Majesty, are you sure it wouldn’t be best to go back to the consultation chamber?” Jotetsu suggested in an attempt to calm the emperor.

“Silence!” Shohi barked as he continued his stride.

Shohi entered his room with loud footsteps to find Sai Hakurei, a palace attendant, waiting for him. He had come to deliver a letter from the four consorts and was just about to leave after placing the letter on Shohi’s desk. Hakurei looked with surprise at the emperor, who was currently an embodiment of irritation, but he quickly changed into his usual captivating smile as he bowed.

“Why, if it isn’t Your Majesty. I’m happy to see you in high spirits as always,” Hakurei said sarcastically.

“What part of me looks to be in high spirits?!” Shohi spat as he took a seat on the sofa, resting his chin on his hand.

I know it. I just know that Saisakoku... No, not just Saisakoku—Shu Kojin and the officials are all secretly mocking me for how young I am as an emperor. They think I lack experience and prudence, Shohi thought bitterly.

Jotetsu entered the room after Shohi and exchanged glances with Hakurei. Seemingly having picked up on something from Jotetsu’s gaze, Hakurei maintained his smile as he approached the sofa and kneeled.

“Shall I bring you some tea?” Hakurei asked.

“No need,” Shohi replied.

“How about some warm wine?”

“No need.”

“Then shall I call someone here?”

“There is no one who—” Shohi was about to turn down the offer when the smile of a certain carefree palace woman suddenly crossed his mind.

“Shall I call Rimi for you? I can have her make something pleasing to the tongue,” Hakurei said softly, as if seeing through Shohi.

“She is preoccupied helping Shusei with his research in the cuisinology hall. I cannot simply call her here without a reason.” Shohi feared that if he selfishly robbed Rimi of her favorite pastime, she might come to dislike him. He didn’t want her to complain about him being a selfish youth with no patience too.

Still... I want to see her face... If he could just lay his eyes on her face, Shohi felt it might rid him of his miserable feelings.

“Your Majesty, I have a suggestion. What do you say about spending time with Rimi each night? She will gladly offer her time to you,” Hakurei said as he narrowed his eyes.

“Do you think that airheaded woman who has nothing but food on her mind would happily visit me?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” Hakurei said confidently.

Jotetsu, who was standing by the window, turned his gaze outside. He had a slightly sarcastic smile on his lips.

“That palace attendant is more impatient than he seems,” Jotetsu whispered in a voice too quiet for anyone to hear.

Then, an aide suddenly appeared by the entrance to the room and kneeled.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. Chancellor Shu Kojin is here to see you,” the aide announced.

Everyone turned toward the entrance when Shu Koji slid into view. He returned their gaze with a faint smile.

“Excuse the sudden visit, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 1: The Young Emperor's Troubles

I

Despite her fingertips being numb from the cold, Setsu Rimi wanted to see her work though, so she continued diligently placing thin slices of fruit in a drain basket. Next to her was the cuisinologist Shu Shusei, who had just finished his own tasks.

"I'll take it from here, Rimi," Shusei said, his white breath visible in the cold as he reached out to take the pot of sliced fruit from Rimi.

"It's fine. I'm almost done." Rimi smiled as she shook her head.

Shusei hesitated for a moment before capitulating.

"Very well, I'll leave you to it," he said, moving the drain basket with fruit into the sunlight.

It was the year 112 of the Konkoku calendar. Winter had come to Konkoku. It was a pleasant, windless day. The sun shone gently onto the roof of the octagonal cuisinology hall, located among the buildings belonging to the Ministry of Rites. Even so, the dry air of the mainland was cold enough to cut your skin. The modest sunlight would not let Rimi warm up. Even with cotton-padded clothes, the cold air entered her clothes by the neck and ankles, causing her body to steadily grow colder.

After Rimi finished her work, she quickly returned to the cuisinology hall with Shusei.

"Wow, that was cold," Rimi said once inside.

The cuisinology hall was pleasantly warm thanks to the three braziers placed inside. Rimi was frozen to her core, and as she placed her hands by a brazier, she started shivering from the temperature change.

An adorable silver creature—Tama—jumped down from a roof beam and climbed onto Rimi's shoulder, curling herself around Rimi's frozen neck. Tama

appeared to be warming Rimi up with her soft body. Rimi thanked Tama and patted her back.

Two bumps protruded from the silver fur between Tama's ears. Her feet featured five claws each, akin to those of a small bird, and small pearl beads were trapped under the claws on her front right foot. This creature was the most noble of all divine beasts, the Quinary Dragon that had been in the possession of the emperor since the founding of Konkoku. Yet her appearance was that of a slightly unusual pet.

"I'm sorry for making you do all that, Rimi," Shusei apologized as he removed an iron kettle from the brazier and poured hot water into a teacup, nimbly preparing a cup of tea that he then handed to Rimi.

"I'm your assistant. Of course I'll help," Rimi replied.

Their fingers brushed when Rimi reached out to take the cup. Shusei's cold fingers startled her, but Shusei remained expressionless as he pulled his hand away. He turned around, sat down at his desk, and started writing. The cuisinology hall, its walls lined with books, turned quiet. Rimi warmed her fingers with the teacup and slowly drank from it while giving Shusei a perplexed look.

It feels like he's been speaking to me a lot less since the Declaration of Stability... Maybe I'm overthinking it, Rimi thought, but Shusei feels somehow distant.

The Declaration of Stability, a ceremony held by the emperor and his four consorts, had taken place just one month ago. In preparation for the ceremony, Rimi and Shusei had been appointed as the consorts' cooks, and they had spent a lot of time together. She had felt much closer to Shusei back then, and they had opened up to each other. But the moment they had gone back to their usual work following the Declaration of Stability, it was as if Shusei had been distancing himself from Rimi. Still, Rimi refused to give up as she called out to him.

"The fruit we just sliced and put out to dry is jiasheng, isn't it? What are you planning on doing with it?" Rimi asked.

"It won't survive the winter fresh, so we're drying it to preserve it, ensuring

it's available whenever His Majesty needs it," Shusei replied with his back still to Rimi.

Shusei's reply was brusque, and he made no attempt to look toward Rimi. This was how almost all his replies had been lately, and he also seemed to avoid looking at Rimi. Although he was still as kind as ever, having worried about Rimi being cold and offering her tea, their conversations had simply fizzled out.

A lively conversation... A lively conversation... Master Shusei cares about His Majesty and cuisinology... His Majesty and cuisinology... Rimi suddenly had a brilliant idea and broke into a smile.

"Master Shusei! Why don't we slip some of the jiasheng we put out to dry in with His Majesty's supper tonight? That way we can see if drying it changes what effects it has!"

Shusei stiffened, and a stack of papers rustled as they fell out of his hand. He turned to Rimi, pale-faced.

"Do you remember what effect jiasheng has?!" Shusei asked. Though Rimi had succeeded in making him turn around, she had for some reason also made him frantic.

"Yes, I remember it well. I believe you said it makes you aroused."

"What do you think will happen if we let His Majesty eat that?!"

"Well, he would become aroused, of course," Rimi answered matter-of-factly.

Shusei looked at Rimi and hung his head. He looked as if he would have collapsed onto the floor had he not grabbed the edge of the desk behind him to support himself.

"You think this doesn't concern you, don't you, Rimi?"

"Of course it concerns me. In order to evaluate the effect of the jiasheng, I need to observe His Majesty together with you and gradually adjust the amount he eats."

"That's the wrong kind of concern." Shusei once again turned his back to Rimi.

"Um... Wrong in what way, exactly?"

“Generally. And while I’m at it, ‘slipping’ something into someone’s food sounds as though you are trying to poison them. Just say that you are ‘serving’ it to His Majesty. If anyone heard you talk about slipping something into His Majesty’s food, you would quickly get a visit from the Ministry of Personnel. Besides, it sounds to me as if you’re trying to experiment on His Majesty.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll be more careful. But, Master Shusei, there is something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Why are you always turning your back to me lately?”

“Why do you always notice things like that when the important things seem to escape you?”

Shusei dropped his shoulders dejectedly, and Rimi grew ever more confused, question marks filling her head.

Rimi recalled what Shusei had said a week before the Declaration of Stability. *Is Master Shusei ill after all? He said that he has some kind of illness but that it wouldn’t infect me. Yet he also said he wouldn’t die from it. What could it be? Premature baldness? Wait, no, being bald isn’t an illness. However, as far as he’s concerned, becoming bald at such a young age could be troubling enough to treat it like an illness. Since he’s always avoiding looking at me, could it be that he has signs of balding on his forehead?*

Rimi stepped away from the brazier and slowly approached Shusei from behind. She quietly stood on her tiptoes and tried to study Shusei’s head. Noticing Rimi behind him, Shusei quickly turned around, and their faces nearly collided in the process. Shusei let out a yelp and his face turned red.

Though Rimi had yet to confirm any signs of balding on Shusei’s head, she launched into an unprompted, passionate monologue.

“Master Shusei! Balding isn’t an illness! I don’t care if you lose some hair! Even if you go completely bald, I won’t think of you any differently!” Rimi exclaimed.

Tama stood up atop Rimi’s shoulders and curiously looked at Shusei’s head with her round, blue eyes, as if asking, “Is he really balding?”

“What in the world are you talking about?!” Shusei shouted, unable to hide his discomposure when a voice suddenly reached them from the entrance to

the hall.

“Um, excuse me...” the voice said hesitantly as the door to the hall opened. An aide, who looked to still be a child, timidly peeked in through the doorway.

Shusei straightened himself, tried to regain his composure, and turned toward the entrance.

“Do you need something?” Shusei asked calmly.

“His Majesty has sent for the cuisinologist and Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” the aide explained.

Concern flashed on Shusei’s face, but he quickly nodded.

“Very well. We will be there shortly,” he said.

The aide left the hall, and Rimi turned to Shusei with a perplexed look.

“But he already had his usual look at Tama this morning. What could he need from us now?” Rimi asked.

Each morning, Rimi would visit Shohi’s room together with Shusei and show Tama to the emperor before leaving for the cuisinology hall. Tama had recently stopped hiding under Rimi’s skirt whenever Shohi was present, so the morning audiences would be over quickly and without incident. The same had been true for this morning’s visit.

“I couldn’t say. But if he’s sent for us, we have no choice but to go.” Shusei seemed similarly perplexed, but regardless, the two of them set off for the emperor’s chambers.



Lately, I feel guilty whenever I’m in His Majesty’s presence. Especially when Rimi is with me... Konkoku’s finest scholar and proud cuisinologist Shu Shusei was at his wits’ end as he struggled with a difficult problem.

Shusei prided himself on having happily taken on any challenge that came his way, having solved most of them ever since he was a child—but the current sorry state of affairs was different. He felt as though the pride he had amassed over the course of his life was collapsing. He was unable to control his own heart—and even though he was aware of the problem, he had no idea how to

solve it.

This is pathetic. Why can't I find a way to control my own heart?

Shusei glanced to his side where Rimi was waddling along, seemingly having a difficult time walking, and he sighed quietly.

"Ah... I can't walk..." Rimi complained. The Quinary Dragon was hiding under her skirt, clinging to her leg and preventing her from walking normally.

Though certainly not ugly, Rimi was far from a beautiful princess—she was a normal, cute girl. Yet one month ago, Shusei had found himself considering her more charming than any other woman in the world. That feeling had only grown stronger each day since he first realized it. He had also made a mistake by embracing her once; whenever he remembered the sensation of her delicate body in his arms, his heart became abnormally restless. But Rimi had not noticed Shusei's feelings. She continued to innocently call his name and step closer to him. This only added to his distress.

Shusei knew that Rimi's adoration for him could not be love. Since she was always in want of a place to call her own, she was simply happy to have been given one as Shusei's assistant and innocently followed after him like a puppy, trying to make herself useful.

If Rimi wasn't a palace woman of the rear palace... No, if only she wasn't the target of His Majesty's affection... What would I have done? Futile thoughts filled Shusei's mind. But the reality remains the same. No matter what, I can't let Rimi or His Majesty realize my feelings for her. His Majesty having special feelings for Rimi is a first step to producing an heir, and it's something to celebrate. I have to suppress these troublesome feelings.

He knew what he had to do, but Shusei was unable to fully suppress his feelings. That was why he was suffering. Whenever he was in the presence of Shohi, Shusei felt as if he was betraying him.

They announced their arrival to an aide and were shown to the emperor's chambers. They bowed before entering the room, but as Shusei lifted his head, he noticed an unexpected figure in the room and was taken aback.

"Father..."

Jotetsu was standing by the window as usual, and Hakurei could be seen behind a partitioning screen in the back. Shohi was sitting at the table in the middle of the room, and sitting opposite him was the chancellor of Konkoku, Shu Kojin.



Hearing Shusei mention his father, Rimi realized who the unfamiliar official in the room was.

This is Master Shusei's father, the chancellor of Konkoku...Shu Kojin.

He had a slender face and was wearing a black shenyi. He was smiling faintly, but his shrewd almond eyes warned you to stay on your toes. The collar and sleeves of his shenyi were embroidered with vermillion thread. The color was reminiscent of an ember burning in the darkness, which added to his inscrutable impression.

He seems somehow...scary... It was not only because of the rumors that he was a cunning person—the air about the man in front of Rimi made her instincts recoil.

Kojin had also been informed that Rimi had become the guardian of Tama—the Quinary Dragon. Thus, one might have expected him to show some amount of interest in her, or even to scorn her. Yet his eyes contained neither the curiosity of meeting someone for the first time nor contempt. They were dispassionate as they calmly analyzed the situation. This only made Rimi more scared of him.

“I was informed that His Majesty had sent for us,” Shusei declared, bewildered.

“Enter,” Shohi ordered. “You have it right. I called for you.”

Rimi followed Shusei into the room, lowering her gaze as she stopped.

“What might you need from us, Your Majesty?” Shusei asked.

“I have something important to tell you, but Rimi comes first,” Shohi explained. “I could tell you myself, but I will leave it to the palace attendant. This was his idea, after all.”

Shohi seemed to be careful to act properly in the presence of the chancellor. He signaled with his gaze toward Hakurei behind the partitioning screen, and Hakurei stepped out.

“Rimi,” Hakurei said gently. “Rejoice. His Majesty has bestowed upon you the duty of serving his suppers.”

Shohi’s suppers were usually prepared by Shusei using cuisinological knowledge.

“Really?! And you suggested that, just for me, Master Hakurei?!” Rimi’s eyes lit up, and she all but forgot about her fear for the chancellor in front of her.

Though she had been assigned as Shusei’s assistant, she had not been allowed to assist with preparing Shohi’s suppers. Naturally, only trusted individuals were allowed near the emperor’s meals. It was an honor to Rimi to be granted this duty along with Shusei—but what made her even happier was the prospect of getting to use her skills as a cook to satisfy someone every day, just like when she had served her Saigu sister.

“I’m happy for you,” Shusei said with a smile. “This is proof that Hakurei and His Majesty have recognized your hard work.”

“I will do my best to assist you, Master Shusei.” She exchanged glances with Shusei and was almost ecstatic from happiness, but they were interrupted.

“No, Shusei needn’t bother. You alone will prepare His Majesty’s meals, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” a cold voice declared. It belonged to Shu Kojin.

“What?” Rimi and Shusei turned toward Kojin.

“What are you saying, Father?” Shusei asked.

“Shusei, you are to suspend your cuisinology research for a while. Naturally, you will take no part in cooking for His Majesty. Leave it to Lady Setsu. You will devote yourself to your duty as His Majesty’s grand councilor instead.”

Shusei’s expression froze.

“You are aware that Konkoku is seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Saisakoku, are you not?” Kojin asked, and Shusei nodded in response.

Saisakoku... That's that land of spices, Rimi thought.

Rimi had heard of the country before. In Konkoku it was called Saisakoku, but the proper pronunciation was apparently “Saisha.” The writing, the clothes, the lifestyles, and even the color of people’s skin in Saisakoku differed from both Konkokuans and Wakokuans. Rimi had never even laid her eyes on someone from Saisakoku. However, she often heard people talk about it. It was located to the west on the continent, and although it was smaller in size than Konkoku, it was an empire situated on fertile land, ruled by a dynasty that had spanned centuries. Many rare spices and herbs were cultivated there, and even the distant countries of the north sought to establish relations in want of their wares.

Yet Saisakoku itself had been highly isolated over the past century or so, and only three small southern countries had succeeded in establishing relations with it. As all spices from Saisakoku passed through these three countries before being shipped to the rest of the world, they were said to profit substantially from the trade. If Konkoku were to establish relations with Saisakoku and take part in the trade, it was also bound to profit considerably. This had been a major objective of Konkoku ever since the founding of the empire.

“You see, there have been talks of Saisakoku sending an emissary to Konkoku. But we need His Majesty to decide whether to welcome the emissary or not,” Kojin explained. Shusei cast him a dubious look.

“Why would they send an emissary out of the blue?” Shusei asked.

“I made a concession!” Shohi exclaimed. “Yet that emperor of Saisakoku sent a reply that was insolent beyond belief!”

Shohi angrily thrust his fist into the armrest before falling silent as if reluctant to say anything more. Kojin opened his mouth to explain further.

“His Majesty sent Saisakoku an official letter,” Kojin said.

It had been a long-standing wish of Konkoku to establish relations with

Saisakoku—but the negotiations had reached a stalemate, and officials had come crying to Shohi that a new approach was needed.

“Officials discussing amongst themselves is leading us nowhere.”

“We can’t proceed without the emperors joining the dialogue.”

“Please write an official letter to Saisakoku.”

“Even Saisakoku can’t simply ignore a personal letter from Your Majesty.”

If Konkoku sent a letter, it would mean abasing themselves. As the proud emperor of Konkoku, Shohi had hated the idea of acting humble toward another country. Still, the officials pleaded with him and explained that it was a deep-rooted wish of Konkoku, so Shohi reluctantly conceded. He finally sent a letter in an attempt to curry favor with Saisakoku that said, “I invite you to Konkoku. Let us discuss this matter together.”

The emperor of Saisakoku, however, sent a curt reply, saying, “As the emperor, I cannot leave Saisakoku. I shall send an emissary.” In other words, the reply said that a simple emissary, rather than the emperor himself, was more than good enough for Konkoku.

Shohi had gone mad with rage upon hearing of the reply, but both Shu Kojin, the Minister of Revenue, and the Minister of Rites had urged him to welcome the emissary. In a fit of uncontrollable anger, Shohi had left the consultation chamber without making a decision.

“First we need His Majesty to decide if we will allow the emissary into the country. If we do, the question is how. If we do not, we need to reconsider how we negotiate with Saisakoku. There are more issues than one could count, and His Majesty needs someone to consult with,” Kojin said.

“But I know little about politics. I can’t imagine that I would prove useful to His Majesty. Why are you recommending me, Father?” Shusei asked.

“I’m not the one who recommended you. It was His Majesty’s wish.”

“His Majesty’s?” Shusei reiterated in surprise.

“Do you dislike the idea of assisting me, Shusei?” Shohi asked in a sullen tone.

“That is not what I meant. I’m only worried that I won’t prove very useful

when it comes to politics.”

“Whatever you think, you are the one I want to consult with,” Shohi said, implicitly stating that he did not want to consult with the chancellor or any of the other officials. Shusei furrowed his brow in concern but kept silent. “I have no intention of removing you from your post as cuisinologist. I only ask you to serve me until the matter concerning Saisakoku is over with.”

His Majesty almost seems to be in pain... Rimi observed. At a glance, Shohi was sitting as arrogantly as ever, but his expression seemed painful and sad. He reminded Rimi of a lonely child putting on a brave front while having no one to rely on.

Having served Shohi for many years, it was inconceivable that Shusei didn’t notice this too. Still, as someone who had no interest in involving himself with politics, giving up his work as a cuisinologist to provide consultation for Shohi was not something he could agree to so easily. However...

“Very well,” Shusei said as he let out a small sigh.

I had a feeling he would accept it.

Shusei was always concerned about Shohi, and he couldn’t simply leave him alone after seeing the emperor’s demeanor. He was far too kind to turn him down.

Does that mean I’ll have to be in the cuisinology hall alone every day? I’ll have to take care of His Majesty’s meals all by myself? Rimi realized that she felt sad about this, and just how much she had enjoyed spending time with Shusei. This seemed to have shown on her face.

“Rimi, will you allow me to have Shusei by my side?” Shohi asked. Rimi’s eyes widened in surprise at Shohi’s slightly timid voice. He had realized that Rimi would be lonely without Shusei.

Being asked in such a frank manner, Rimi was unable to object. Shusei must have also been unable to say no after Shohi told him that he wanted him as his advisor so frankly.

Master Shusei is His Majesty’s loyal retainer, and His Majesty also called the four consorts his own retainers despite them being women. Then, as a palace

woman of the rear palace, I must also be one of His Majesty's retainers, and it's my duty to support him. Now was not the time to listen to the voice deep inside her that longed to be with Shusei. She was trying to find a place for herself in Konkoku in whatever form she could, and she had to act in a way befitting someone in her position.

"Master Shusei is the finest scholar of Konkoku. I am certain he will serve you well," Rimi said.

I'll just have to continue the cuisinology research while Master Shusei is away. I'll borrow Master Shusei's knowledge to prepare the meals that His Majesty needs. That way Master Shusei can focus on advising His Majesty without worrying. I need to do my duty for his sake. Rimi silently encouraged herself. It was true that she would miss Shusei, and those feelings would not fade, but she still had to carry out her job.

Shohi looked relieved upon hearing Rimi's answer, while Shusei sent her a slightly sad look.

"Your Majesty, your first order of business is to decide whether to welcome the emissary from Saisakoku," Kojin continued without wasting any time. "We can't let them wait too long, or they will think that you are an indecisive emperor."

"I am aware! I do not need you here anymore. Leave!" Shohi snapped back at Kojin's pointed remark, but Kojin simply smiled confidently as he stood up.

"Shusei, give His Majesty your full support. Your Majesty, I shall take my leave now."

Hakurei left the room together with Kojin, and Jotetsu also took the opportunity to leave.



"What an awful man you are." Jotetsu's laughter hit Hakurei's back as he walked down a cloister on the way back to the rear palace.

Hakurei stopped walking. Jotetsu was close enough that Hakurei could feel his warmth against his back. Hakurei did not understand how, but Jotetsu was able to stay unnoticed until he was close enough that the target could feel his

warmth and breath against their skin. Hakurei did not turn around to face him.

“What an odd thing to say. What awful thing have I done?” Hakurei said.

“You’re trying to get Rimi closer to His Majesty through brute force, aren’t you? And you distanced Shusei from her in the process.”

“I may have been the one to suggest leaving Rimi in charge of His Majesty’s suppers in order to bring them closer together, but I did not intend to separate her from Shusei. It was His Majesty himself who insisted on having Shusei as his advisor.”

“But you already guessed that he’d seek Shusei’s advice after he stormed out of the meeting with the officials, didn’t you? You must have assumed that His Majesty didn’t want anything to do with the officials after that, in which case Shusei was the only person he could turn to.”

“Who knows?” Hakurei said, feigning ignorance, and Jotetsu laughed from the back of his throat.

“You’re a sly fox with a pretty face.”

Hakurei turned around and looked Jotetsu in the eye.

“I’m more interested in Chancellor Shu,” Hakurei said. “Why do you think he let a palace attendant like me speak out of turn without saying anything? He also allowed His Majesty to ask Shusei for advice. One can only assume that this is all going according to his plan.”

“And what of it?”

“If he wanted to get the matter of Saisakoku over with as quickly as possible, he could have simply pressured His Majesty into following his advice. But with Shusei as His Majesty’s advisor, even if things don’t go wrong, there’s no guarantee that everything will go as Chancellor Shu hopes. There must be some reason why he let Shusei get involved.”

“I’m just a sword,” Jotetsu noted with a grin. “Unlike you and Shusei, I don’t think.”

Hakurei mentally furrowed his brow at how wily Jotetsu was. Jotetsu would not do something that disadvantaged Shohi—but it was not as though his

devotion and loyalty extended only to him. There were always signs of Jotetsu being manipulated from the shadows by someone else.

“Is that so?” Hakurei responded. “In any case, do you have some kind of secret motive for talking to me, Jotetsu? You seem to be keeping a close eye on me.”

“I mean, you’re the guy who stole the Quinary Dragon.”

“If that is what you’re afraid of, you would have started more closely monitoring me much earlier. Yet you only recently started doing it—ever since more concrete talks of establishing relations with Saisakoku began.”

Jotetsu shrugged. Hakurei knew that it was useless trying to get an answer out of him. This was nothing more than an attempt to keep him in check.

“Though if this is your ulterior motive, then this is certainly a peaceful way to go about it,” Hakurei said.

“I’ve got no interest in a peace like that.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Hakurei turned around and Jotetsu watched him walk off.

“So the bell hasn’t rung yet...” Jotetsu mumbled, his voice too low for Hakurei to hear.

Upon returning to the rear palace, Hakurei was informed by another palace attendant that the director of the Department of Service, I Bunryo, had sent for him. Bunryo had become much more docile ever since his confrontation with the four consorts, and this was Hakurei’s first time being called to his office in almost a month.

Is something suspicious happening concerning the negotiations with Saisakoku? I wouldn’t be surprised. There are enormous profits to be made from trading with Saisakoku. Hakurei pondered how Jotetsu had added to his surveillance targets as he entered the smoke-filled, medicine-smelling room. Hakurei bowed to I Bunryo, who was sitting lazily on a sofa in the back of the room.

“I believe you summoned me, Director I. What may I help you with?” Hakurei

said.

Bunryo picked up a letter from the sofa and handed it to Hakurei.

“Read it here and burn it with the candle when you are done,” Bunryo commanded.

“Who is it from?”

“Just read it.”

Hakurei did as he was told and carefully opened the letter. It was a summons addressed to him. Hakurei’s eyes widened upon seeing the sender.

“Why...would this...”

Bunryo grinned, seemingly enjoying Hakurei’s bewilderment. He was exceedingly satisfied with having removed Hakurei’s usual smile from his face.



Shusei looked at Rimi in concern.

“Are you sure you’ll be fine on your own?” Shusei asked.

“Yes. Probably. Somewhat. More or less,” Rimi replied.

“Those three adverbs at the end make me tremendously worried.”

After Shusei had been appointed as Shohi’s advisor and told to pause his cuisinology research, he and Rimi had returned to the cuisinology hall. Shusei was explaining to Rimi how to continue the research while he was gone. Of course, it was not as if anything would happen to the research overnight, so Rimi was not particularly worried about that part. The real problem was Shohi’s suppers.

Shusei would use the kitchen located in the north of the Hall of the Rising Dragon, where Shohi lived, to prepare the emperor’s supper every evening. It was a kitchen specifically for making the emperor’s meals, and it was always stationed by the head of the cooks, the Chief of Dining. Shusei would serve food developed through cuisinology with the permission and help of the Chief of Dining.

A roofed passageway extended straight north from the Hall of the Rising

Dragon. It passed through the north gate of the hall and was only used by waiters and servants, so the pillars were undecorated besides a layer of paint. There was a gate stationed with guardsmen halfway along the passageway. The passageway on the other side of the gate led to the kitchen.

“For today’s supper, I have prepared blue brittlegills, which drastically reduces fatigue, as I heard that His Majesty will have a long meeting with officials today. Use those to make his meal,” Shusei instructed.

“Blue brittlegills... You mean those infamously stinky mushrooms...?”

Shusei had offered Rimi blue brittlegills once in the past. They had tasted unbelievably bad.

As the sun started to set, Tama returned to the rear palace alone. The plan today was for Shusei to guide Rimi to the kitchen before stopping by Shohi’s room. Rimi would have to stand in an unfamiliar kitchen on her own, without Tama or Shusei.

The kitchen was located at the end of the passageway with vermillion pillars in front of it and was as large as the Palace of Small Wings where Rimi lived. It was gracefully built, and if you looked at it from the outside you would never have thought it was a kitchen. But as soon as you passed through its doors, the stoves that lined the walls, the well, and the water storage came into view. In the back was a door leading to the stone pantry. The Chief of Dining was stationed in a room on the west side of the large kitchen.

“First I’ll introduce you to the Chief of Dining, Yo Koshin. You won’t be able to use this kitchen without his permission,” Shusei said.

The emperor of Konkoku employed roughly twenty personal court cooks—double that if you included servants. They were responsible for cooking his daily meals and food for banquets. The Chief of Dining oversaw the court cooks and had full responsibility over all the food served to the emperor. He had no official post in the government nor a rank, but he was indispensable to the Konkokuan court.

The Chief of Dining is responsible for the meals in the outer palace, which is very different from how it works in the rear palace.

In the rear palace, each individual palace had a kitchen. While some highly ranked concubines employed skilled women of their own, food was mostly prepared by servants belonging to the Food Service. The servants would cook food for the palace women in the kitchens belonging to their palaces. Thus, Rimi only needed to become acquainted with the servants to be able to use the kitchen without incident.

They stepped into the cool air of the kitchen. The sun had almost set, so it was dark inside. On the western wall was an opening leaking candlelight leading to another room. That was the Chief of Dining's room.

"Yo Koshin, are you there?" Shusei asked.

III

Shusei called Koshin's name as he approached the entrance to the lit-up room.

"Is that you, Cuisinologist?"

A man looked out through the opening, and his brilliant white robe stood out in the darkness. He looked to be five or six years older than Shusei and possessed the strong, confident demeanor of someone used to ordering others around. This man must have been Yo Koshin. He had the appearance of a young boss.

Koshin flashed them a smile and boastfully straightened his back.

"You're earlier than usual. But not to worry, I have already finished removing the scum from the blue brittlegills," Koshin said.

"Thank you, Koshin. You're always an enormous help," Shusei replied.

"Oh, this is nothing," Koshin said when he noticed Rimi standing behind Shusei. He studied Rimi intently with his large, slanted eyes and furrowed his brow in suspicion. "By the way, Cuisinologist, who is this girl with you?"

"She is a palace woman, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. I'm sorry for how sudden this is, but I have become unable to prepare His Majesty's suppers. However, I will still have carefully selected ingredients sent here each evening."

“What?” Koshin said in a surprised tone, but his face soon took on a cheerful expression. “Then will I be the person in charge of making His Majesty’s meals using your ingredients?!”

“No, Lady Setsu will be taking over for me starting today.”

Koshin’s delight vanished in the blink of an eye.

“Are you not comfortable with me using your ingredients, Cuisinologist?” Koshin asked.

“Under normal circumstances, I probably would have asked you instead. However, this is His Majesty’s wish. He ordered Lady Setsu to prepare and serve him supper.”

“You can’t possibly claim that a palace woman is capable of cooking!”

“She’s originally a princess from Wakoku, where she had the duty of serving food to her god. Over the summer she also worked with me to serve food informed by cuisinology to the four consorts. I can assure you of her skill.”

“I’m not sure how much I can trust the skill of a girl like that...but if His Majesty says so, then so be it.” Koshin glared at Rimi, and Shusei responded with a worried frown.

“I would like you to help her just as you have helped me. Rimi, this is the head of the court cooks, Yo Koshin, Chief of Dining,” Shusei explained. “There is no better cook in Konkoku than him. He helps me prepare His Majesty’s suppers. I’m sure he will prove to be a great help to you too.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Setsu Rimi, and I have been put in charge of making His Majesty’s suppers,” Rimi hurriedly introduced herself after seeing Shusei signal her with his eyes.

Koshin stared at Rimi as though he was looking at a stray dog that had found its way into a clean kitchen.

Wow... It’s like he hates my presence from the bottom of his heart. Well, I guess that’s to be expected. It was the Chief of Dining’s responsibility to prepare the emperor’s meal. The only exception was the suppers prepared by the cuisinology scholar. If the cuisinologist became unable to prepare the meals, it

was only natural for that responsibility to fall on the Chief of Dining. Anyone would be angry if an unknown palace woman forced her way in instead, claiming that it was the will of the emperor.

“Koshin, can I trust you to assist Lady Setsu? I need to return to His Majesty,” Shusei said.

“I don’t think there’s anything I could help with here, Cuisinologist. After all, this is the esteemed Lady of Precious Bevy appointed by His Majesty himself,” Koshin said, still glaring at Rimi as though she was a stray dog.

Shusei seemed to notice that Rimi was startled by Koshin’s demeanor as he started whispering into her ear.

“I also had a hard time getting him to help me when I first came here. But he is not an unreasonable person,” Shusei said.

He shot Rimi an encouraging glance. Rimi was happy to see him look her straight in the eye for the first time in a long while, and she could feel her courage returning.

“Understood,” Rimi nodded.

“I’m leaving her in your hands,” Shusei said before leaving the kitchen.

Koshin continued to glare at Rimi after Shusei had left.

“Um... Master Koshin, is there something on my face?” Rimi asked.

“Just call me Koshin, Lady of Precious Bevy. I may be the Chief of Dining, but I am a simple cook with no rank. To a Lady of Precious Bevy of sixth rank such as yourself, I might as well be an insect. So do feel free to think of me as one. You can do as you please,” Koshin said before turning his back to Rimi and returning to the light of the western room.

“Please wait!” Rimi said, frantically following him. “This is my first time in this kitchen! I have no idea where the ember is, let alone the utensils and plates!”

After entering the Chief of Dining’s room, Koshin sat down at a desk and started writing in what looked like a ledger. It was a modest room with stone flooring that felt cool to Rimi’s feet, small enough that it could only fit five or six adult men. Bookshelves nailed to the wall added to how cramped the room felt.

The wall was covered with bundles of paper bound with string. The covers of the bundles showed names such as *Spring Dining Records*, *Cooking for the Ill*, and *Methods of Cleaning and Maintenance*.

That's...

Koshin looked down at the ledger in front of him.

"I did say you can do as you please, Lady of Precious Bevy. Of course, I have no idea what you could be capable of when doing as you please," Koshin said.

Shusei had said that Koshin was not an unreasonable person. If anything, Rimi was the one being unreasonable here, showing up unannounced at the behest of Shohi.

The bundles of paper behind Koshin were handwritten books bound by Koshin himself. They all seemed to contain notes pertaining to cooking—records of dishes served in spring, descriptions of food appropriate for serving someone who was ill, and methods of maintaining a clean kitchen. The books were all dirty with finger marks, the sides bent as a result of having been flipped through many times. It was proof of how passionate and serious Koshin was about food and cooking.

The Chief of Dining took pride in his work overseeing the cooks and making the emperor's food, and this kitchen was his sanctuary. It would have been stranger had he not been bothered by a young palace woman barging in, claiming to have come on the emperor's orders. The more passionate he was about his job, the more Rimi's presence would have infuriated him.

This is his sanctuary. He rules over this place.

The kitchen Rimi had stood in by herself as an Umashi-no-Miya had been a special place to her. Envisioning it, she realized how disrespectful she had been for barging in.

Rimi turned around and looked out into the kitchen from the Chief of Dining's room, went down on the cold stone floor, and groveled. It was a show of respect for the sanctuary that was the kitchen.

Koshin looked up, saw Rimi kneeling on the floor, and stood up from his chair in astonishment.



“What the hell are you doing?!” Koshin exclaimed.

“I am asking you for permission to set foot in this kitchen, Chief of Dining.”

“Permission?! Why’re you asking me?! You’re a Lady of Precious Bevy of sixth rank, for crying out loud!”

Unable to process what Rimi was doing, Koshin’s bewilderment turned into something close to anger, and he started yelling. Rimi slowly raised her head.

“And what of it?” Rimi asked, her eyes on the still darkening kitchen.

“Aren’t you ashamed to be groveling in front of someone who doesn’t even have a rank?!”

“It is only natural to kneel to ask the Chief of Dining permission to enter a place that he protects and maintains. My rank doesn’t matter. I am doing nothing to be ashamed of.”

Rimi turned around on the stone floor and looked up at Koshin. His eyes were as wide as a cat’s, and his cheeks were flushed, perhaps from rage.

“I ask you for permission. Please allow me to set foot in the kitchen,” Rimi repeated.

“I told you to do as you please!” Koshin roared.

Rimi smiled softly at him.

“Thank you very much,” she said. Though he had said the same thing as before, the meaning was different. His initial “do as you please” had stemmed from negligence and rage; this one was a declaration of permission and rage. He was still enraged, but the meaning differed. She had at least shown her respect and been given permission in return.

I guess this will have to do for now.

Rimi stood up and gave Koshin a bow.

“Do as you please. I don’t care what His Majesty said, just do whatever the hell you want. I’m sure whatever you make will be a sight to behold.” Koshin threw Rimi another threatening glare before sitting back down at his desk.

He had glared at her and treated her coldly even though they had only just

met. But compared to someone who would obsess over ranks and try to curry favor with an unfamiliar palace woman and the cuisinologist, this treatment was far more pleasant.

He has pride as a cook and is passionate about his duty to serve His Majesty food. He was an exemplary Chief of Dining.

Rimi entered the kitchen and started searching for flint. As luck would have it, she found it quickly, but candlesticks were nowhere to be found. She strained her eyes and looked around the dimly lit kitchen and found a hollow located high up on a pillar. The hollow contained an oil lamp filled with rapeseed oil. The evenly spaced pillars all had oil lamps similarly placed in them, ensuring that every nook and cranny of the kitchen was visible when lit. Rimi lit all the oil lamps.

I believe Master Shusei said that he had prepped the blue brittlegills for His Majesty today... Given how Koshin had acted, it seemed unlikely that he would tell Rimi the location of the ember and the cookware, and where he had placed the blue brittlegills after removing the scum. Though it would cost her time, her only option was to get started while she searched.

She found the ember and lit a fire in one of the stoves before looking for the mushrooms. She found them soaking in a pot filled with water. They had been lightly boiled and then left to float in the water. She picked up a single mushroom from the pot. It was a slightly bluish mushroom with a flat cap, smaller than her palm. She took a whiff of the mushroom, and it smelled so bad that she instinctively turned her head away.

“I-It stinks!”

Tears filled Rimi’s eyes. She had tasted the mushroom once before, and it had an extremely harsh taste. The texture was rubbery and revolting, and the stench overwhelmed the nose. The harsh taste could be removed with the right ingredients, and if cut the right way, the texture could go unnoticed. The problem was the smell.

“Ways of removing bad smell... Alcohol, heating... I doubt either of them would help here.”

Rimi was lost in thought when she sensed someone watching her. She turned

around to find Koshin leaning against the opening to his room and glaring her way. He seemed to be observing her to see that she didn't ruin the ingredients or destroy the utensils.

"Chief of Dining, do you have any experience cooking blue brittlegills?" Rimi asked.

"Hell no," Koshin replied curtly.

"How come? You have been helping Master Shusei, haven't you?"

"The cuisinologist is still researching the ingredients. It's not my place to butt in. But I suppose it's about time that I..." Koshin interrupted himself and made a sullen face.

Oh, I see. Koshin must have been very interested in the potent foods that Shusei would bring every evening. Rimi was interested in them herself, and she could guess how a fellow cook might feel. Shusei would use those ingredients to birth a new horrific dish for each supper, and it must have been painful for Koshin to watch from the sidelines. He had been looking for an opportunity to get involved, all the while vividly imagining what he could do with the ingredients, and he had probably started thinking about trying to push Shusei's strange cooking in a better direction.

"What would you do with these blue brittlegills, Chief of Dining?" Rimi asked.

"Why do I gotta tell you something like that?"

"I would like to make His Majesty as satisfied with his food as I can," Rimi replied honestly.

"Use your head, would you?" Koshin scoffed. "A fancy palace woman like you with a face painted white should be able to think of something."

"I don't use face powder."

"It doesn't matter if *you* use it or not."

Many women of the rear palace, including the four consorts, often used white face powder, but Rimi disliked it. It was made from minerals, and she could never get over the discomfort of it on her skin. It was as white as wheat, so Rimi sometimes even considered simply substituting it with wheat mixed with water.

There were even men who thought it *was* wheat.

Wheat...? That's it, wheat! Rimi wondered whether Koshin had intentionally given her advice, or if it was just a coincidence.

"Thank you, Chief of Dining!" Rimi exclaimed.

"For what?"

Koshin was in as foul a mood as ever, but Rimi broke into a happy smile. She immediately started rummaging through the kitchen in search of wheat. She found it as well as some jitang chicken soup prepared in advance.

She took out various cooking tools and chopped the mushrooms into pieces smaller than rice grains. She put a pot of water on a stove and brought it to a boil. She put the wheat in a large pot and mixed it with the water, then added the finely chopped mushrooms to the mixture.

She then put an empty pot on another stove, heated some fragrant sesame oil in it, and added spring onion, ginger, and garlic for additional fragrance. As she poured the jitang she had found into the pot all in one go, the water reacted to the sesame oil and was sent flying with an intense sound. But Rimi simply continued pouring as the fragrant oil floated to the top of the jitang.

With the jitang still in the stove, Rimi poured the wheat, water, and mushroom mixture into the water that was boiling in a pot on the first stove. The water became covered with white bubbles. After it had quieted down, countless translucent beads with dark centers were floating on the surface. They were reminiscent of millet and looked like small pearls. Rimi scooped them up and poured cold water over them.

Koshin had been watching until then, but he suddenly retreated to his own room.

At least he allowed me to be in the kitchen... I think...

Chapter 2: The Visitor from the West

I

While the thought of having left Rimi behind weighed on his mind, Shusei walked toward the chamber where Shohi was waiting.

I just hope Rimi will get along with Koshin.

Although it was only temporary, the interruption of his research and his job serving Shohi's suppers had Shusei in low spirits. Had it been an order from his father, Shu Kojin, he would have refused it outright; but this was a request from none other than Shohi himself.

"You are the one I want to consult with," Shohi had said frankly. Shusei had been unable to turn down the emperor's request of wanting to rely on him when they had known each other since they were children. Shusei was also currently having inappropriate feelings toward Rimi, and he had felt as though he was letting them get the better of him, subconsciously making him try to defy Shohi.

Rimi had gotten the short end of the stick by having been put to work preparing Shohi's suppers alone. For her, the biggest issue at hand would be Yo Koshin. Shusei himself had worked hard to make the Chief of Dining cooperate with him—he had initially been treated with only superficial politeness as the "prodigal son of the chancellor, devoted to shady research."

There was also the question of what might happen if a palace woman like Rimi were to wander around the outer palace alone. Even though this was the imperial palace, there was no guarantee that no miscreants were wandering around. It was not unheard of for beautiful aides to be taken behind buildings and forced to experience something terrible.

I'm still worried about leaving her alone...

Just as he turned around to return to the kitchen, Shusei found that Jotetsu

had silently appeared further down the passageway.

“Where are you off to, Shusei? His Majesty’s waiting for you,” Jotetsu said.

“I’m going to the kitchen,” Shusei replied. “Get out of the way. I can’t leave Rimi alone. If anything happens to her, I—His Majesty will go mad. She’s His Majesty’s favorite concubine.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be making sure that nothing happens to her.”

“You will? Why?”

“For His Majesty’s sake. Why else?”

Something seemed suspicious. Jotetsu was not one to do something for his master out of concern unless he was explicitly told. Someone must have ordered him to do so—and that someone was not Shohi. The young emperor was currently preoccupied with soothing his rage as he struggled to decide whether to accept the emissary from Saisakoku or prioritize his own pride. He had no time to be concerned about Rimi.

“Whose orders are you following?” Shusei asked.

“You don’t trust my desire to help a friend in need?” Jotetsu said.

Jotetsu lazily gave a different excuse than before, and Shusei could tell that this was going nowhere. At the same time, if Jotetsu was keeping an eye on Rimi, then she was in good hands. Shusei decided to accept his help.

“Very well. I’ll take you on your word. I’m counting on you, Jotetsu,” Shusei said.

“Don’t mention it,” Jotetsu replied.

Shusei left Jotetsu and returned to Shohi’s room.

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting, Your Majesty,” Shusei greeted Shohi.

Shohi stood by the window, observing the dark garden outside. The vivid red fruits of the heavenly bamboo contrasted with the otherwise dull winter garden.

“Did Rimi go to the kitchen? Should you really leave an absentminded woman like her alone?” Shohi asked as he looked at the fruits, which gleamed in the

darkness like the eyes of a small animal. It appeared he had, if belatedly, realized the danger of leaving Rimi by herself.

“Jotetsu has promised to protect her. There is nothing to worry about.”

“Jotetsu? I see. Very well, then.”

“Your Majesty, we should close the window. You will freeze.” Shusei touched Shohi’s shoulder, and it was cold as stone.

Shohi sat down at the table, and Shusei started preparing tea.

Why did Father agree to make me His Majesty’s advisor? One question after another crossed Shusei’s mind as he spilled hot water over the tea leaves and then poured boiling water over the teapot to warm it up. *If he wanted to ensure that the negotiations with Saisakoku proceeded as smoothly as possible, he could have convinced His Majesty to listen to him. Yet he respected His Majesty’s wish to consult me instead.*

The fact that his father had accepted the proposal indicated that it had been somehow advantageous for him. The question then was what he could be planning.

“Shusei, I am angered by how Saisakoku has treated us,” Shohi said feebly as Shusei put a cup of tea in front of him. “I am also angered by the officials who tell me to simply accept their offer, despite how they have insulted me.”

Shusei had been informed earlier about the details of the communications between Shohi and the emperor of Saisakoku. Even Shusei had felt as though Saisakoku and the officials were looking down on Shohi. Had Saisakoku sent a similar reply during the reign of the previous emperor, the officials would have been furious and suggested exiling all Saisakokuans from the country.

One year had passed since Shohi took the throne, and he was still only sixteen years old. The officials had weighed the emperor’s dignity against the profits to be earned by trading with Saisakoku, and the latter had been significantly heavier. Shohi’s anger and dejection were understandable. Still, thinking about it objectively, it was hard to see what could be gained from prioritizing Shohi’s dignity. He would just earn a reputation of caring only about his pride despite having achieved nothing during his rule.

“Your Majesty, it is true that Saisakoku is looking down on you and that the officials are prioritizing profit over your dignity. I agree that this is an unforgivable act of disrespect. However...” Shusei steeled himself, looking Shohi straight in the eye. “I believe you should accept the emissary from Saisakoku and treat them courteously.”

“Why? You just said that they are being disrespectful,” Shohi said.

“They are, but right now it’s more important to show your capabilities as an emperor. You must bear with it. Establishing relations with Saisakoku has been the wish of Konkoku since its first emperor,” Shusei explained. “If you managed to accomplish it, then it would be a tremendous achievement, and the first step to becoming so accomplished that no one can disrespect you.”

“I am the *emperor*.”

“Yes, you are. But, Your Majesty, what kind of emperor do you wish to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you wish to be an emperor revered only for his lineage while everyone secretly looks down on you? Or would you rather be one whose subjects respect and worship him from the bottom of their hearts?”

Shusei wondered if he may have been too direct, but Shohi simply stared, motionless, at the tea in front of him. He gave no indication of being angry.

He’s changed a lot. Before, Shohi would have insisted on his status as the emperor and become enraged. But now, he tended to listen to what Shusei had to say. Clearly, he had changed. When Shohi had blindly asserted himself as the emperor, the Quinary Dragon had avoided him, and Rimi had remained distant. The consorts of the rear palace, who he had initially treated without respect, had turned out to be people with feelings just like him, a fact that had caused him to struggle. Ever since the beginning of spring, Shohi had suddenly started really seeing what was around him—all thanks to Rimi’s influence.

“The emissary will be sent at the behest of the Saisakokuan emperor. If Saisakoku has no intention of establishing relations, the emissary will likely treat this as a vacation,” Shusei explained. “But even if they do, if you entertain them, get them on your side, and convince them that they stand to gain too,

you'll have won. You need to make the emissary recommend that their emperor establish relations. That would be the first, vital step."

"So you say we should welcome the emissary?"

"You should consider what kind of emperor you wish to be, and do what needs to be done to achieve that, Your Majesty."

"You will be serving me for some time, correct? Without being blinded by cuisinology?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Shusei responded firmly.

Shohi let out a small sigh.

"I will welcome the emissary, entertain them, and make them want to establish relations. Until then, you are to remain by my side, Shusei," Shohi commanded.

Shusei felt happy to be relied upon, but at the same time, he was pained by his infatuation. Even so, he truly desired to be helpful to this young emperor.



Rimi finished preparing the meal, put it into a pot with a lid, and started carrying it to Shohi's room. The sun had set, and lights burned vividly in the clear winter air on the sides of the passageway. Rimi passed through the gate to the Hall of the Rising Dragon where she suddenly found herself all alone.

I didn't realize how quiet it was near His Majesty's room.

The inside of the hall was silent, despite there being a good number of guardsmen placed around it. Rimi imagined how Shohi must feel, being revered and waited upon, all the while having to endure this loneliness.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty. I have brought your supper," Rimi said as she knelt outside Shohi's room.

"Enter," a brusque reply could be heard through the door.

Instead, the door opened from the inside, and Shusei showed his face. It seemed that Shohi was still consulting with him.

"Did everything go well?" Shusei asked.

“Yes, it did,” Rimi replied. “Master Shusei, have you been speaking to His Majesty this entire time?”

“Indeed... However, I was just about to leave.” Shusei flashed what seemed like a forced smile on his face before bowing toward Shohi. “I will take my leave now, Your Majesty. Enjoy your meal. Now, Rimi, go inside.”

Rimi did as she was told, and Shusei closed the door behind her. She heard the sound of his footsteps slowly fade from outside.

I wish Master Shusei would have joined us instead... That way I could have shown him how I prepared the ingredients... Before, Shusei would always ask how Rimi had prepared her meals as he examined them together with Shohi. This confirmed Rimi’s suspicions that he was trying to distance himself and left her feeling dejected.

“Today’s supper does not have the usual strange smell. Did you not use the ingredients from Shusei?” Shohi asked as he curiously looked at Rimi from the table.

“I did. Master Shusei’s ingredients were used for the dish,” Rimi replied.

Rimi pulled herself together and placed the pot on Shohi’s table. She was there to cook. Her job depended on how well she was able to prepare Shusei’s ingredients. That was also why she had been assigned to help him with his research. So having Shohi try the food came first. Nothing would come of complaining about how cold Shusei was being.

“What ingredients are they?” Shohi asked.

“They’re blue brittlegills,” Rimi explained.

“Those awfully stinky mushrooms... I always tell Shusei that I refuse to eat revolting food, yet the suppers he brings me are always the same.”

As much as he complained, Shohi would still obediently consume the strange food Shusei fed him. For how short-tempered he was, Shohi still seemed to listen to others.

“Please give the meal a try, Your Majesty,” Rimi urged as she removed the lid.

Steam rose from the pot, which contained a thick jitang with beaten eggs.

Half-translucent beads, similar to millet, floated on the surface. It was reminiscent of congee. Rimi poured the contents into a bowl and placed it in front of Shohi along with a spoon.

“It does not stink. What a miracle,” Shohi remarked.

“I chopped the mushrooms into small pieces and enveloped them with wheat, trapping the peculiar smell. The soup is thick, and the pieces are small, so you can eat them with the jitang.”

Shohi put the spoon in his mouth, and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Are these really those stinky mushrooms?! This is *edible*!” Shohi exclaimed.

“Blue brittlegills are apparently very potent for recovering from fatigue. Master Shusei picked them with the hard work Your Majesty would be doing this month in mind.”

Shohi put another spoonful in his mouth.

“It is warm. It reminds me of congee, but it is smoother, like tang. The texture is interesting too. I like it,” Shohi said.

Shohi’s remark put a soft smile on Rimi’s face. As long as she did her best to come up with creative solutions, she would be able to hear Shohi’s words of satisfaction every evening. That was indescribable bliss to her.

“I’m glad you are enjoying it, Your Majesty,” Rimi said.

Shohi eagerly continued to swallow one spoonful after another, but then he suddenly froze as if remembering something. He stared at his spoon.

“I...have decided to invite the emissary from Saisakoku here,” Shohi muttered. “I will have to endure the disrespect of both the emperor of Saisakoku and the officials who look down on me. They may not say it out loud, but I have felt it ever since I took the throne—there is a hint of contempt toward me during every part of the decision-making process and in the way the officials act at conferences.”

Shohi lightly bit his lip.

“I feel it all the time, which puts me on edge,” he added. “I feel ashamed and frustrated at being treated like that.”

His dignity as emperor seemed to be hurt, which pained Rimi to see.

“No matter how the emperor of Saisakoku or the officials act, your dignity will never suffer as long as you have a noble spirit,” Rimi said.

“Is that truly how it is?”

“Well, for one thing, Tama has lately taken a liking to Your Majesty. It could be that she thinks you’re acting a bit like an emperor.”

“I feel as if you half insulted me and half complimented me.” Shohi let out a small chuckle. It was the first time Rimi had seen him smile today. “I like that you are always so carefree.”

Shohi finished his meal and moved to the sofa. His tension gone, he seemed relaxed as he rested his head against the armrest and watched Rimi put away his bowl. Something seemed to burn in his eyes, as if he desired something, but Rimi took no notice of it.

“Rimi, will you come here?” Shohi requested.

“Yes, Your Majesty. What is it?”

Rimi strolled close to the sofa when Shohi grabbed her arm. He pulled her on top of his lap and embraced her.



II

Shohi's eyes were directly in front of Rimi. The beauty of his eyes and the length of his eyelashes startled her, rendering her mute. She looked confused, failing to grasp what was happening.

"I want you. Now," Shohi declared with a raspy, breathy voice. His hands were placed gently on Rimi's waist.

Rimi twisted her body from being tickled as she realized what Shohi was trying to do.

He couldn't be! Rimi looked into Shohi's eyes in surprise. They gleamed with a fiery light. She turned pale.

Perhaps this was Shohi's way of taking out his frustration from having been looked down on—grabbing the nearest woman in an attempt to relieve himself. Rimi wanted none of it.

"N-No... Stop..." Rimi said, her voice trembling from monumental fear.

Shohi mercilessly tightened his grip on Rimi's waist. Despite the fact that he was a year younger than her, he still had the strength of a grown man. Struggling on top of his lap was all Rimi could do.

"Why?" Shohi asked.

"I... Um..."

Rimi was panicking and unable to give Shohi a proper answer. All she could think about was wanting to escape his lap as she put both hands on Shohi's chest and tried to push away with all her might. Shohi stubbornly tightened his grip again. After a moment's struggle back and forth, Rimi finally pushed Shohi away while kicking the seat of the sofa. Rimi was sent flying away from Shohi, just as she had hoped, but Shohi refused to let go, and they both tumbled onto the floor together.

Rimi lay on the floor facing upward, trapped below Shohi. A scream was stuck in Rimi's throat as a result of the distressing situation, when...

“Your Majesty, I almost forgot. Regarding what we just—”

The door opened, and Shusei entered, holding some documents. He thought it odd that no one was by the table nor the sofa, but it didn’t take long before he spotted the pair on the floor. His eyes widened.

“Rimi...” Shusei muttered, dumbfounded, but he immediately averted his gaze, left the documents on the table, and turned around. “I’m sorry for interrupting you! Excuse me!”

“Master Shusei! Wait, no...!” Rimi only managed to get the words out as Shusei had disappeared from view, and there was no hope of her raspy voice reaching him. Even if it had, it would have done her no good. Shusei had seen what was unfolding and left the room to avoid interrupting them. He wanted Shohi to become interested in women, so telling him that she didn’t want this would only disappoint him.

Would Master Shusei be happy to have His Majesty relieve his frustration like this?

Rimi would rather have died than to be used as a tool for Shohi to relieve his stress—but maybe being Shohi’s tool was just what Shusei desired of her. She was a woman of the rear palace. Although she had done her best to make a place for herself and thought her efforts had been recognized, in the end, it seemed her role as a woman overshadowed her endeavors.

“Master Shusei...” The scholar’s name slipped past Rimi’s lips, and Shohi grimaced as if stung with a needle.

“Did you say ‘Shusei’?” Shohi asked, but he went unheard.

Tears of defeat and sorrow welled up in Rimi’s eyes, and she covered her face with both hands. She didn’t want Shohi to see her utterly miserable face. He was an emperor, and he must have thought it natural to expect Rimi to play the role that Shusei desired of her. Shohi would probably have thought that her crying from something so natural was ridiculous. That’s why she didn’t want him to see her face.

Her body felt lighter. Shohi must have moved off her.

“I should not have done that. Do not cry, Rimi,” Shohi apologized, dispirited.

Rimi removed her hands in surprise. Shohi was sitting on his knees next to her with a troubled expression, extending a hand to her.

“Please, do not cry. I somewhat...rather lost my composure. Forgive me. I have been through a lot today. I would not do this normally. I will not do it again, I swear,” Shohi said.

Rimi couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Shohi seemed uneasy from seeing her cry. She didn’t know why he was apologizing, but Rimi could tell that Shohi was being earnest.

“Forgive me,” he repeated.

“Y-Yes, I do,” Rimi said as she carefully took Shohi’s hand and sat up. Shohi then let go of her hand, stood up, and walked to the window with his back to Rimi.

“Do you dislike it when I touch you?”

It was not as though Rimi disliked Shohi, but she could not remain calm upon being touched. That had nothing to do with Shohi in particular—she simply didn’t want to be touched by someone she didn’t love.

“S-Someone that...I’m not in love with touching me...” Rimi spoke hesitantly, her voice still trembling from the shock of what had just occurred.

“But you would not mind if it was Shusei?”

Rimi wondered how she would have reacted if Shusei had done the same thing. She would have been surprised, but she probably wouldn’t have pushed him away. She might have even waited nervously to see how he would touch her. As she imagined this, her cheeks turned red, and she looked down. Shohi watched out of the corner of his eye and lightly bit his lip.

“Leave, Rimi,” Shohi commanded.

Rimi quickly collected the tableware and left Shohi’s room.



Does Rimi have feelings for Shusei?

Shohi pressed his forehead against the window and closed his eyes tightly. The way Rimi had called for Shusei had sounded like the way a woman calls for

the one she loves. Thinking back, Rimi had spent a lot of time with Shusei, and she had always seemed happy to be with him.

How about Shusei?

Seeing Shohi on top of Rimi, Shusei had immediately left the room. It had seemed as though he didn't want to disturb them. Perhaps he had no special feelings toward Rimi—or maybe he was just respecting Shohi's wishes.

The idea of Rimi being dear to Shusei angered Shohi. Rimi was a woman of the rear palace and belonged to the emperor. Someone else falling in love with her was disrespectful. But if Shusei really did have feelings for Rimi and acted as he did out of respect, Shohi couldn't help but pity Rimi, which also angered him.

Now, if Shusei felt nothing for Rimi, that was also infuriating in its own way. With how sadly she had called for him, if the Loveless Scholar simply claimed not to feel a thing with a disinterested tone, Shohi would feel like punching him in the head for his coldheartedness.

No matter how he looked at the situation, Shohi felt annoyed—yet he wasn't mad at either of them. That was the problem. He wanted to shout angrily at someone, but he couldn't bring himself to hate them. He needed both of them.

If Rimi truly cares for Shusei then...what should I do...?

Shohi felt a sharp pain in his chest. Just as he needed to focus on the matter of Saisakoku, he now had to suffer from having no one to consult about this newfound anguish.



That was... That was... I see...

Having fled to the cuisinology hall, Shusei collapsed onto his desk. The feelings that writhed in pain in his chest overwhelmed him and made it impossible to think. He even felt nauseous.

This must be why Hakurei suggested having Rimi prepare the suppers, and His Majesty went along with it because he wanted Rimi by his side.

Even Shusei could tell that Shohi had changed for the better since coming to know Rimi, and this change would not have escaped someone as sharp as

Hakurei. If Shohi became a good enough emperor for Hakurei to recognize, any reservations Hakurei had toward him would disappear. Hakurei must have judged that Rimi was needed for this to happen. He had set the stage for Shohi, who was inexperienced with love.

Is he doing something to Rimi right now? Even though it only brought him pain, Shusei couldn't help but imagine it. *I know it should be something to be celebrated, but I...*

He clenched his fist and hit the top of the desk. He couldn't stand this feeling.

Shusei then rummaged through the cuisinology hall for wine. Upon finding it, he gulped it down ridiculously quickly before falling asleep on a sofa. He wondered if he would ever be able to look Rimi in the eye again.

The next day, Shohi ordered Shusei to summon Chancellor Shu, the Minister of Revenue, and the Minister of Rites, and informed them that Konkoku would accept the emissary from Saisakoku. Shusei spent the day preparing the Ministry of Rites to welcome the emissary and sent the messenger from Saisakoku back saying that Konkoku would accept the offer.

The Minister of Rites was exceedingly pleased with how quickly Shusei had acted, and he thanked him for his work. Shusei, however, accepted the comments dispassionately with a blank look.

Before long, the emperor of Saisakoku replied that he would send his younger brother, Gulzari Shar, as an emissary. By the time Gulzari Shar and the rest of his delegation arrived, Konkoku had just entered the coldest time of the year.

III

The delegation from Saisakoku paraded down the main street toward the imperial palace of the lightly snow-covered capital of Annei. All snow had been spotlessly removed from the road, and stone tiles had been placed to prevent the road from turning to slush. It was makeshift paving, but it was enough for a rumor to spread among the townspeople that the emperor was groveling to Saisakoku.

Gulzari Shar received a warm welcome after his long journey and was urged to rest for the day. The delegation would be staying in the Palace of Twin Dragons, which was reserved for state guests. The palace was visible from the main palace gate, located on the southern edge of the imperial palace, and consisted of a mansion surrounded by a garden and a tall wall.

A two-story lookout was placed in one corner of the palace with a good view of the majestic imperial palace. The roof of the Hall of Ultimate Supremacy, which was the main hall of the imperial palace, the unfathomably long stone stairs leading up to it, and the carving of a five-clawed dragon that decorated the stairs, were all particularly notable. On days such as those with coronation ceremonies, you would be able to see the impressive sight of kneeling officials and officers covering the stone-paved square in front of the Hall of Ultimate Supremacy. The lookout served the purpose of either impressing or threatening visitors with this grand view of the palace.

“The delegation from Saisakoku arrived today, didn’t it? I’ve never seen someone from Saisakoku myself, but I hear their skin is dark. Have you already seen Prince Gulzari Shar, dearest?” Pure Consort Yo asked.

“Huh?” Rimi responded as she vacantly divided up sweets. She looked at Yo in confusion. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

Noble Consort So, who was accompanying them, sighed.

“Do you have a cobweb in your brain or something?” So said. “It’s not just your expression that’s empty but also your head, Lady Setsu.”

“Noble Consort So, can’t you be a bit kinder?” Worthy Consort On hesitantly pleaded.

“What’s wrong, Lady Setsu? You’ve been acting strange lately—ever since you started making His Majesty’s suppers.” Virtuous Consort Ho knitted her perfectly shaped brows.

The consorts were gathered at the Palace of Great Beauty where So lived. On warm days, they would have tea in the western peach garden, but since winter had arrived and snow had started to fall, they had made a habit of having tea parties in each other’s palaces instead. Rimi would always be invited to the

gatherings—or more accurately, she would be ordered to bring snacks.

The room was pleasantly warm thanks to the brazier placed in it. Not a single sound could be heard from outside. The snow in the garden seemed to absorb all of the noise from the surroundings.

Rimi enjoyed participating in these gatherings where the consorts would dismiss their handmaids and freely talk amongst themselves. But despite how much she enjoyed it, this time Rimi was distant and felt restless. Shusei had paused his research to devote himself to advising Shohi, and Shohi had touched her on the same day that she had served his first supper, which Shusei had witnessed.

Shohi had not made any more advances since that day two weeks ago. Rimi was thankful, but things remained awkward between them.

Also, whenever she came across Shusei, he would smile awkwardly and then leave as though fleeing. Rimi was sad to think Shusei was avoiding her. He must have had a false impression that she had become Shohi's favored concubine, and he did not want to be too close to the emperor's favorite bride. Rimi wanted to correct his misconception, but she was given no opportunity to do so. Shusei was swamped with work preparing to welcome the delegation from Saisakoku. The only person she would meet each night was Shohi, and whenever she asked about Shusei, he would only say that he was doing well or that he was busy.

"Is something on your mind? You're welcome to talk about it," Ho said, and the other three consorts nodded in agreement with her offer.

Rimi was happy to see the consorts concerned about her, and she didn't want to lie to them.

"I think Master Shusei has started to dislike me because of a misunderstanding," Rimi said.

"My, is that all? I'm not sure what kind of misunderstanding it is, but why don't you simply clear it up? Silly girl. That cuisinologist is not the kind of person who won't listen," So said, smiling as she teasingly put her hand up against her mouth. The nails on her hands were neatly manicured.

During winter, there were no flowers So could use to arrange her hair. So instead decorated it with large, beautiful silverwork flowers.

“But I don’t have any opportunities to speak to him,” Rimi said.

“You have to make opportunities for yourself!” Ho said firmly. On gave her a worried look.

“The cuisinologist is busy working as His Majesty’s advisor, is he not? Even if you try, it might not be so easy to find an opportunity to see him,” On said.

“You’ll simply have to ambush him, dearest!” Yo said in a lively voice as she clapped her hands together. “Before I joined the rear palace, I met an absolutely lovely older girl at a teahouse. I wanted to give her flowers, but for whatever reason, she was just running away. So I located her mansion and waited to ambush her. I was able to give her the flowers in the end.”

Everyone froze at Yo’s sudden confession. Their faces seemed to say, “You did *what?*” To Yo it may have been a success, but it must have been a terrifying experience for the other girl. The others wondered if perhaps Yo shouldn’t have been arrested.

“Well... I don’t know about the Pure Consort’s example...” On cleared her throat and smiled at Rimi. “But it’s not as if the cuisinologist is running away from you, so an ambush might be a good idea.”

An ambush... I’d be happy if I could just get a glimpse of his face. I hear he’s so busy that he doesn’t even have time to sleep, so I’m worried about his health. If I can at least see that he’s healthy, I might be fine. She would get nowhere just worrying about it alone. It would be better to make an opportunity to see Shusei herself, just as the consorts said.

“I will see what I can do,” Rimi said.

Rimi waited on the consorts as she appreciated their presence. They made her feel reassured and alleviated the loneliness that she had felt from being separated from her Saigu sister. Her sister would probably have complained, “Don’t compare me to those little girls,” but she would surely be happy that they helped Rimi forget her loneliness.

Isn’t that nice, my Umashi-no-Miya. Rimi felt as though she could hear her

sister's voice.

"Well, it seems that we both have our fair share of worries," Ho said, frowning as she held her teacup.

"My, did you make someone dislike you too? But that can't be anything out of the ordinary," So teased.

"I could say the same to you, Noble Consort So. I'm talking about my family. Ever since it was announced that an emissary would visit, my grandfather has been breathing down my neck. He's asking me incessantly whether I'll be meeting the delegation or if I'll have any contact with Prince Gulzari Shar, the emissary."

"My father is just the same. He sends me letter after letter talking about Saisakoku, so I just trample on them, nail them to the ground, and set them on fire." Yo made a satisfied expression.

"Why would your family ask about that?" Rimi asked, perplexed.

"There are enormous profits to be made in trading with Saisakoku," On explained gently. "They must be trying to get a headstart on making connections. Even if Konkoku is unable to secure a trade agreement as a country, individual merchants could still secretly make contact with Saisakoku and profit that way."

"Oh, how detestable. Ma Ijun is one thing, but I can't believe even the Ho house have their sights set on this. I thought they were supposed to be a royal house as prestigious as the Ryu house. I hope your family can learn some modesty," So said ruthlessly.

Ho responded with a sad smile. She, Rimi, and the other consorts had started to understand that So didn't particularly intend to be mean—her choice of words was just harsh.

"I have nothing to say in my defense," Ho said. "Now that the Ho family's direct line of succession is gone, my grandfather is growing desperate. Everything would be solved if we could find my runaway uncle, but it's been twenty years since he disappeared. We're still searching, but there's little hope that he's even still alive."

“Oh, yes, you are referring to Master Ho Seishu, correct? I hear he was very wise,” On said.

“He was so wise that he must have become tired of the Ho house’s obsession with power. Unfortunately for my grandfather, His Majesty has declared that any child we birth will belong to all four consorts, so even if I birth his heir, the Ho house won’t be able to control him like they hope. Now that they are being pushed away from the throne, they must be desperate to make a grab for financial power instead.” Ho said this as though it didn’t concern her, calmly recrossing her long legs.

I didn’t know that the Saisakokuan emissary was so influential, Rimi thought. It was only natural, then, that Shusei was so busy welcoming him.

That evening, Rimi set off for the kitchen in the outer palace to cook Shohi’s supper as usual. She had heard that the kitchen had been hectic today. The warmth from the fires and the smell of herbs still lingered in the air. The court cooks were usually concerned with making the emperor’s breakfast and lunch, but today they had also been tasked with cooking for the people from Saisakoku who had been expected to arrive in the evening. They had been working late to prepare their meals and carry the food to the Palace of Twin Dragons before they could finally go home.

Rimi peeked into the western room to find an exhausted Koshin with his head on his desk.

“I’ll be using the kitchen,” Rimi announced to his back.

“I don’t care,” Koshin replied without lifting his head.

They must have cooked an incredible amount of food for the delegation, Rimi realized. Koshin’s fatigue was evidence enough of that.

Rimi returned to the kitchen. The cuisinology ingredients were scheduled to arrive before sunset each day. Today’s ingredient was a root vegetable reminiscent of tree roots. It was thinner and harder than burdock with what looked like whiskers growing all over it. She broke one in half and the exposed area immediately turned black, proving how bitter it was. A basketful of it had been brought to the kitchen along with the usual handwritten note from Shusei.

“These are roots of a type of tree called the immortals’ tree. They’re nourishing, alleviate tension, and help you sleep better. Good luck,” the note said.

As Rimi looked at the beautifully written note, she felt as though she could hear Shusei’s voice. She wanted to hear his real voice.

Oh, right... Shusei sleeps in the cuisinology hall almost every night without going back home. What if I wait for him there?

Then, someone interrupted her thoughts.

“Hello. You there,” a soft voice could be heard from the entrance to the kitchen.

Rimi looked toward the entrance to find a young man. He had a particular color palette to him—his skin was dark, his hair white, and his eyes purple. It was a combination you would never find on Konkokuans or Wakokuans, who were all black-haired with black eyes. The mole under his eye was somehow sensual.

Given his appearance, he must have been from Saisakoku. It was Rimi’s first time seeing a Saisakokuan, and both his skin and hair were beautiful. As Rimi gave him a puzzled look, wondering what someone from Saisakoku was doing here. The man smiled.

“Yes, you, my pretty little girl. Won’t you give me what I need?” the man asked.

“Huh?” Rimi responded.

The man maintained his smile as he stepped into the kitchen without hesitation. His slim-fitting upper garment had long sleeves, which reached down to his knees. His clothes were covered in spiraling, vine-like embroidery. He wore a slender skirt tied to his waist with a soft cloth that flowed elegantly as he walked.

He nonchalantly took Rimi’s head, kneeled in front of her, and pushed her hand against his forehead. It seemed to be a Saisakokuan greeting. The man gave a pleasant smile and stood up again.

“Well? Won’t you give me food?” the man asked.

“Um... Are you hungry?” Rimi asked.

“Not me. It’s my mister who’s starving.”

He had a grasp on the Konkokuan language, but his pronunciation was slightly off—though Rimi had not herself mastered the language to the point that she could criticize him. His mention of his “mister” confused her for a moment, and she searched her mental dictionary. She seemed to recall that it could be used in a sense similar to “master.”

“Oh, I see. Your mister, is it? Now that’s a predicament,” Rimi said.

“Yes, my mister. It’s a predicament.”

The two cheerfully chatted in broken Konkokuan, when Rimi heard a stern voice from behind.

“Hey, Lady of Precious Bevy, who’s that guy? Did you let him in here without asking?” Koshin said angrily.

“No, not at all. He came in here by himself,” Rimi said, turning around to face Koshin.

The Saisakokuan man smiled at Koshin and kneeled.

“Hello there, my new friend person,” the man said as he pushed Koshin’s hand against his forehead.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Koshin roared as he pulled his hand away and jumped back. The man, however, continued smiling as he stood up.

“Please give me food,” he said, turning to Rimi. “My mister is very hungry.”

Koshin gave him a suspicious look.

“‘Mister’? Do you mean ‘master’ or ‘lord’?” Koshin asked.

“Ah, yes. That’s it, ‘master.’ So please, give my master food.”

Rimi and Koshin exchanged confused glances, trying to decide what to do.

“Shuri!” Shusei’s voice could suddenly be heard from the entrance.

Master Shusei! Shusei’s unexpected appearance made Rimi’s heart race, but

at the same time, she worried about how he looked. *I finally got to see him! But...he doesn't look very well.*

Shusei seemed very flustered. He glanced at Rimi but then ran up to the man from Saisakoku.

“You can’t simply go off on your own like this!” Shusei said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Master Shusei,” the man—Shuri—replied without a hint of remorse on his face, and Shusei could feel the fatigue fill his body.

Shusei seemed to notice that Rimi and Koshin were looking confused and gave them an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry about this, Koshin, Rimi. He must have surprised you. This is the cook that accompanied the emissary from Saisakoku. His name is Shuri,” Shusei said.

Shuri put his hand on his chest and gave a Saisakokuan bow.

“The delegation is still waiting to move into the Palace of Twin Dragons, but then Prince Gulzari Shar said that he is hungry,” Shusei explained.

“I believe the food we made is supposed to be in the Palace of Twin Dragons, though,” Koshin said, furrowing his brow.

“I did inform the delegation as such, but Shuri stubbornly insisted on making the food himself, and told us to give him the ingredients he needed. I informed him that the ingredients could be found in the kitchen, and he then pestered me to take him here.”

Though he was a cook, Shuri was still part of the delegation, and they had to treat him with respect. They couldn’t leave it to a servant, but at the same time the officials would not even know the way to the kitchen, so Shusei must have reluctantly volunteered. Shusei personally escorting the cook of an emissary, despite being of fourth rank and having the standing of a vice minister, was a sign of his sense of duty as a cuisinologist.

Shuri looked around the kitchen and fixed his eyes on a vegetable basket. He rushed up to it and started rummaging through it.

“What are you doing?!” Koshin yelled, having run out of patience, but Shuri

ignored him as he picked up a few different vegetables from the basket and put them on the floor.

“I want this. This potato. These nice-smelling green leaves. This bag of nuts. I will take this. I also want meat. Where is the meat? Pork or chicken. It doesn’t matter,” Shuri demanded happily, paying no heed to Shusei’s exhaustion.

“You’re keeping your hungry master waiting, aren’t you? It’d be quicker to go to the Palace of Twin Dragons right away instead. We made sure that the food would still taste good cold,” Koshin said.

“No, I will make it,” Shuri said, shaking his head. “I will go to the Palace of Twin Dragons and make it.”

“If you want something hot, I’ll make it right now and bring it there. We’ve got both prepared vegetables and jitang here, so it’ll be done in no time.”

Shuri’s smile suddenly vanished and was replaced with a shockingly stern expression.

“All you can make is Konkokuan food,” Shuri said in a deep voice. “Konkokuan food does not suit Prince Shar’s tastes. Saisakokuans don’t like Konkokuan food. The etiquette is different too. Saisakokuans eat with their hands. We can’t stand using chopsticks or spoons.”

Rimi was dumbfounded at Shuri’s harsh words. Koshin’s eyebrows were raised.

“I’m sorry? What the hell did you just say?!” Koshin shouted.

“We won’t eat something like that,” Shuri said.

“Don’t you dare insult Konkokuan cooking!”

“Koshin! Give it a rest!” Shusei hurriedly stepped in. “I’m sorry, Shuri. Koshin, please restrain yourself.”

“But, Cuisinologist! Didn’t you hear what he said?!”

“I understand how you feel, but you need to calm down, Koshin.” Shusei grabbed Koshin’s shoulders to prevent him from going berserk and looked over to Rimi. “Rimi, would you mind showing Shuri to the Hall of Enlightenment, where the delegation is resting?”

Rimi quickly asked Shuri to follow her and showed him out of the kitchen. She could hear Koshin shouting from within the kitchen. As they stepped onto the passageway, Shuri gave Rimi a concerned look.

“Are you not giving me food? I need that food,” Shuri said.

“I’m sure Master Shusei will bring it all to you later. He always takes his job seriously.”

“I see. That’s good.” Laugh lines appeared around Shuri’s eyes as he smiled, and his smile seemed childish and innocent.

Rather than making for the northern gate of the Hall of the Rising Dragon, Rimi followed the passageway westward toward the Hall of New Harmony, used for court councils, and the Hall of Enlightenment, where people were made to wait before an audience. The stone paving of the passageway was cold, and the white snow that had fallen on the ground shone dimly in the darkness.

Master Shusei looked like he was having a hard time...

Rimi found herself lost in thought when Shuri suddenly turned to her.

“Are you angry? Since I said Prince Shar doesn’t like your country’s food,” Shuri asked.

“It’s only natural that people from different countries are used to different tastes. And I’m not from this country anyway,” Rimi noted.

“You’re not a Konkokuan?”

“I’m from Wakoku. I was sent to the rear palace as proof of Wakoku’s subservience to Konkoku.”

“Oh, I see... I feel sad for you.”

Shuri patted Rimi on the head. Rimi was surprised by his carefree conduct, but she appreciated his concern.

“Thank you for the sentiment, but I’m fine. I’m not sad,” Rimi said. “Also, saying that you can’t eat another country’s cuisine just because it’s not what you’re used to seems a bit too stubborn to me. If you try it, you might find that it tastes better than you thought.”

Shuri furrowed his brow slightly.

“No, that’s not possible,” Shuri asserted. Even though he was generally friendly, he also seemed stubborn to a fault.

They’ll probably struggle with pleasing these guests—both His Majesty and Master Shusei.

He was friendly and appeared flexible, but Shuri had firm beliefs that he refused to give up. Rimi felt as if his surface friendliness was his method of dealing with people and situations. If his nature was something shared by all Saisakokuans, pleasing the delegation and using them as a stepping stone toward establishing relations with Saisakoku would not be as easy as they had hoped.

The two of them reached the Hall of Enlightenment.

“Thank you, my pretty little girl,” Shuri said with an elegant bow as he disappeared into the building.

Having completed her job, Rimi turned around to walk back to the kitchen when she saw Shusei approaching with quick steps.

“Master Shusei, Shuri has returned to the Hall of Enlightenment,” Rimi said.

“Thank you for the help. That’s one less thing to worry about. The delegation will soon move to the Palace of Twin Dragons. The ingredients that Shuri chose will be carried by servants to the Palace of...” Shusei suddenly trailed off. Before Rimi had a chance to wonder why, Shusei started falling over.

“Master Shusei?!”

Rimi tried to support him, but he was too heavy for someone as small as her. She shouted for help, and a guardsman came running. The moment the guardsman put his hand on Shusei’s shoulder, Shusei collapsed toward him.

Chapter 3: Dreaming of Love

I

Shusei had been dizzyingly busy the past few days. There had been no end to what had to be done to prepare for Saisakoku's emissary. The tasks had been finely allotted between different departments, each with its own official in charge. But everything ended up on the emperor's desk for a final inspection—and reluctant to do the paperwork himself, Shohi would give it to Shusei to take care of in his stead.

Shusei was happy to be busy. The busier he was, the less time he had to think about other things—namely, Rimi. While working, he was able to take his mind off everything. Past midnight, however, the moment he laid down to rest, his thoughts would turn to Rimi, and he often became restless.

As Shohi's personal cook, Rimi would visit his room each evening to bring him his supper, which only made matters worse for Shusei. He felt like he was being strangled as he imagined what might be happening in that room right now.

Thus, he preferred to work himself until he collapsed.

Where is Rimi now...? Is she in His Majesty's embrace...? Shusei thought, half asleep.

"Master Shusei?"

A sad voice called out for Shusei, and he became wide awake. He opened his eyes to see the familiar ceiling of the cuisinology hall above him, along with Rimi looking down at him.

"Thank heavens! You're awake!" Rimi exclaimed.

"Rimi?!"

Shusei quickly sat up and found himself on a sofa in the hall. The braziers, as well as the candles on the table, were lit. Rimi was kneeling next to the sofa. She must have been watching him sleep.

“What happened? Where is the delegation?” Shusei asked.

“You fell unconscious just before the delegation was about to move into the Palace of Twin Dragons. You were carried here by guardsmen. The delegation completed their move with the help of the Minister of Rites,” Rimi explained. “His Majesty returned to his chamber. After hearing that you had collapsed, he said that you are to spend the rest of the evening resting.”

Shusei recalled what had happened before he collapsed. He was relieved to hear that the Saisakokuan delegation’s move had gone well and took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, Rimi. I didn’t mean to cause you trouble,” Shusei apologized.

“Oh, no, I’m just fine,” Rimi said, looking down nervously.

It was Shusei’s first time in a while seeing her so close up. She was so cute that it made his heart restless. He had hoped that some time away from her would calm his feelings, but it wasn’t that easy.

If anything, I’m even more... What do I do? He felt as if he would reach out for her given the slightest provocation.

“Shouldn’t you be with His Majesty? What about his supper?” Shusei asked, as if to remind himself.

“His Majesty was given some Saisakokuan treats by Prince Gulzari Shar, so he is full. He informed me that he didn’t need any supper today.”

“But isn’t your place by His Majesty?”

“My duty is only to serve His Majesty supper. Also, um, Master Shusei...I think you might have a slight misunderstanding...and I wanted to correct it...”

“Misunderstanding?”

“During the first supper I served His Majesty, you came across a strange sight, didn’t you? But that was just an accident... Nothing happened between us. Though I suppose that doesn’t matter to you, does it? That’s right... It doesn’t matter to you...” Rimi trailed off.

“Huh?” Shusei was dumbfounded at the unexpected revelation. He looked at Rimi’s eyelashes for a while before finally continuing. “Nothing? At all? Despite

being in *that* position?”

“I just fell off the sofa together with His Majesty. He apologized to me afterward.”

Rimi’s cheeks were red, and Shusei found her unbelievably adorable. Meanwhile, the fact that nothing had happened between her and Shohi slowly thawed the frozen pain in his chest.

Nothing happened... She still doesn’t belong to His Majesty... Shusei’s feelings toward Rimi welled up. He tried to suppress them, feeling as though he would lose control of himself otherwise.

“I realized you must have had the wrong idea this whole time. But since it doesn’t have anything to do with you, I didn’t...and you seemed to be so busy, so I also became worried about your health...” Rimi’s voice trembled. She seemed to be doing her best not to cry. “I was so happy that I finally got to see you today, but then you suddenly collapsed... I didn’t know what to do...”

Rimi’s eyes, on the verge of tears, reflected the light of the candles. She looked as if she had been beside herself with worry about Shusei’s health and the misunderstanding. Shusei found her eyes beautiful.

“But...I’m happy... I’m so happy that you woke up...” Rimi said, smiling through her tears as she looked up at Shusei. Her earnestness made her all the more adorable, and Shusei became unable to hold himself back.

I can’t! Shusei thought, but he instinctively grabbed Rimi’s slender shoulders and pulled her toward him.

Though she didn’t yet belong to Shohi, she might become his tomorrow—or even tonight. If Shusei didn’t make her his now, he would lose her forever. He couldn’t think of what might happen to them if he made her his—he didn’t even care.

“Master Shusei...?” Rimi’s voice trembled in confusion, but Shusei ignored her and instead embraced her tightly. A faint, warm fragrance of flowers came from her neck. He didn’t want to let go of the delicate body in his arms.

“Rimi,” Shusei said. He realized how sad his voice sounded, and it didn’t seem like his voice at all. Instincts had pushed aside any discretion or sense of loyalty

inside him. His mind grew numb, as if something was possessing him. “You are dear to me. Dearer than anyone.”



For a few moments, Rimi was unable to process what had just happened. But as Shusei tightened his embrace, she realized the situation and felt her whole body growing hot.

“You are dear to me. Dearer than anyone,” Shusei had whispered into her ear, and her earlobe felt as if it was burning up.

Rimi realized that this was a confession of love. Shusei was embracing her out of happiness that nothing had happened between her and Shohi, and Rimi thought that this must be because he cared for her.

But Master Shusei is supposed to be the Loveless Scholar... How can this be? Rimi realized that this might just be wishful thinking. But there was no other way she could think of to make sense of what was happening. Even someone as absentminded as her could understand why he had done this.

I'm so happy. While Rimi was surprised at the Loveless Scholar having fallen in love, at the same time, she was happy with all her heart. Unlike with Shohi, she didn't want to run away. This fact startled her, and she realized her own feelings. She had been yearning for Shusei for a long time. She loved him.

“Master Shusei... I also...” Rimi hesitantly put her hands on Shusei's back. Her eyes met his, and she could sense that they both had feelings for each other.

Shusei gave her a questioning look, seeking to confirm Rimi's feelings, and she nodded. Shusei smiled, and his gaze almost sent Rimi into a frenzy. Her heart wouldn't stop racing at the sight of his kind yet fiery eyes. Rimi had wondered once before what the Loveless Scholar's eyes might be like when falling in love. He had the same beautiful and passionate eyes that she had imagined.

I can't believe this is really happening.

Shusei's handsome fingers touched Rimi's cheek. Her heart started beating even harder at the sensation, and it felt as if it was pulsating in her throat. With Shusei's hand placed softly on Rimi's cheek, he brought his lips toward hers.

“Stop it,” a deep voice commanded.

Rimi and Shusei both jumped and tried to find the source of the voice—but before they could, a muscular figure that had appeared next to the sofa grabbed Shusei’s arm, pulled him up, and punched him in the face.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi screamed. She jumped off the sofa to rush to Shusei, who had fallen to the floor, but a thick arm blocked her way. She looked up and realized that the figure belonged to Jotetsu. “Master Jotetsu?!”



Rimi had no idea what Jotetsu was doing here, but her desire to rush to Shusei's side took priority, and she ran around Jotetsu's arm. But just as she ran past him, Jotetsu forcefully grabbed her upper arm and pulled her away from Shusei.

"Let me go!" Rimi shouted.

"Not happening," Jotetsu replied.

"But Master Shusei..."

"I said, not happening! Don't you dare approach Shusei!" Jotetsu roared in a frighteningly loud voice, and Rimi froze in shock. "Don't you realize your position here?! You're a woman of the rear palace!"

Jotetsu's words served as a well-placed blow to her reason, which she had forgotten in her ecstasy. Shusei sat up on the floor and stared blankly at Jotetsu.

"Jotetsu... What are you doing here?" Shusei asked.

Jotetsu had rage in his eyes. He gave them both a terrifying, condemning look.

"I told you I'd be keeping an eye on Rimi, didn't I? I swear, when someone as honest as you falls in love, you end up obsessing over it, and it's a pain to deal with. Didn't I say to be more careful about who you fall for?" Jotetsu said with a stern expression. "Shusei, what did you think would happen if you stole His Majesty's favorite concubine? Are you so blinded by your love that you'd be happy to throw everything away? I didn't take you for someone that foolish. You too, Rimi—you need to regain your senses, for Shusei's sake."

The words "for Shusei's sake" shocked Rimi. A chill ran down her spine as she thought about what they had just done.

I... What was I...?

Rimi's strength escaped from her body along with the chill. She came close to collapsing onto the floor from despair, and she even started feeling slightly dizzy.

"You may be a palace woman, but as a woman of the rear palace, you are still the property of the emperor. It takes no genius to see what would happen to

someone who made advances on you. Are you trying to get Shusei hanged? You'd be hanging there with him," Jotetsu said sharply.

Rimi felt her body become cold. She already knew full well what Jotetsu was saying, yet she had been too elated and blinded by love to think clearly. Her short-sightedness astonished her. Shusei belonged next to Shohi, and she could never do something to endanger his place there.

Shusei dropped his gaze to the floor. He had also regained his senses from Jotetsu's words. A demon of love had possessed the two of them.

"I'll do you a favor and keep quiet about this," Jotetsu continued. "Shusei, Rimi, nothing is going on between you two. Got it?"

Jotetsu dragged Rimi out of the cuisinology hall by the wrist. As she passed through the doorway, Rimi yearningly looked back at Shusei, who was hanging his head as though hurting from regret and in pain from parting with Rimi.

It was night, and snow was falling silently. The snow covered the imperial palace, absorbing all sound. There seemed to be officials working late as light spilled onto the white snow from the gaps around the doors of the Ministry of Rites buildings. There was a camellia hedge to the side of the cloister. The snow-covered red flowers looked cold. The only vivid color in this white world was freezing from the cold snow. Rimi started to cry as she looked at them.

Master Shusei... Rimi loved Shusei, and she was fortunate enough that Shusei loved her in return. But their love was not to be. They had to suppress their feelings and go back to being just a cuisinologist and his assistant, or a retainer to the emperor and a palace woman. *That's our only option.*

Shusei must have known it too. Rimi was sure that he would do so, and she had to do the same. As she made up her mind, tears ran down her cheeks. They poured forth endlessly, with no sign of stopping.

"It was a dream, Rimi. It was all just a dream. Forget about it," Jotetsu said without turning around as he led her by the hand.

The red camellias were beautiful.



Rimi feels the same as me. Shusei could barely believe it, but there was no

mistaking it. He had doubted his chances, but Rimi had hesitantly responded to him in kind, seemingly entrusting herself to him. His euphoria had been great, but now the dread of reality within him was growing just as large. *I did something terribly foolish.*

Shusei had been left alone in the cuisinology hall, where he reflected on what had just happened. He couldn't believe how foolishly he had acted. It was something he should never have done—for the sake of both Shohi and Rimi. The absurdity of it all caused him to start to grin, and he shut his eyes tightly.

"Something was wrong with me," he said out loud to affirm it to himself—something really was wrong with him. After seeing Shohi and Rimi together like that, all his anxiety and pent-up feelings had driven him mad.

If Shusei had continued, Rimi would have lost the place she had worked so hard to obtain for herself in this foreign country. He had to protect her place here.

Jotetsu's punch had made Shusei come to his senses. Just as he had known from the start, he had to suppress his feelings. Rimi would surely do the same. Whenever they next met, they would talk to each other in the same way as usual. Today's incident never happened, and they had never held any feelings for each other.

II

Rimi cried herself to sleep. Tama stayed with Rimi the whole night, rubbing her cheek against Rimi's, and Rimi found some comfort in this as she dozed off. She dreamt about Shusei, who scolded her for what she had done until she woke up. She would then fall asleep again, only to have the same dream.

The next morning, Rimi set off toward Shohi's chamber together with Tama. It was the usual morning ritual, but today Tama seemed to be in a particularly foul mood. Lately, Rimi had even been able to carry Tama in her arms on the way to see Shohi, but now Tama hid inside her skirt like before with no sign of coming out.

Oh, why must she be in a bad mood today of all days...? If Shusei happens to

be in His Majesty's room, what am I supposed to say?

An aide escorted Rimi to Shohi's room, and she announced her arrival and entered. She saw Jotetsu standing by the window and Shusei at the back of the room. Startled, Rimi's face tensed up. Shusei, however, simply gave her his usual gentle smile, as if he didn't notice her expression.

"Good morning, Rimi. What's the matter? Where is the Quinary Dragon?" Shusei asked.

"Oh, yes, well..."

Rimi felt a slight pain in her chest at the sight of Shusei acting as if nothing had happened—but at the same time, she felt relieved, and she was able to return his smile. She told herself that this was how it should be.

"It seems she's in a bad mood today. She's inside my skirt," Rimi explained.

Jotetsu, who had been observing the two of them, seemed relieved as he shifted his gaze to the window. Suddenly, the door to the bedroom was flung open, and Shohi appeared. He held what looked like a letter, and he was enraged.

"What is this, Shusei?!" Shohi yelled. "This is the first thing you show me in the morning?! Is this your idea of a bad morning joke?!"

Shohi ran up to Shusei, who gave him a troubled look.

"I thought it was important enough to inform you as soon as you woke up, Your Majesty," Shusei explained.

"I can tell as much! My question is why Gulzari Shar is refusing to meet with me today!"

Shohi threw the crumpled letter onto the floor, and it rolled to Rimi's feet. Rimi reflexively picked it up and opened it. It was a letter from Saisakoku's emissary, Gulzari Shar, written in Konkokuan. It appeared someone had written it on his behalf.

Today a meeting under the guise of a tea party with Shohi had been planned, but Shar was apparently tired from the long journey and wished to postpone it. He also wanted to visit the outskirts of Annei to rest up from the trip. He was

requesting a suitable guide and bodyguards. That was the gist of his letter.

Even Rimi was astonished. The prince had come all the way to Konkoku, but he refused to participate in meetings with the emperor where the topic of trade might come up. But now that he was here, he might as well do some sightseeing. This would have made anyone angry, not just Shohi.

Wow... He's almost impressively selfish. What kind of person is this Prince Gulzari Shar? Although she was interested, as a mere palace woman, Rimi was unable to visit the Palace of Twin Dragons by herself to get a glimpse of him.

"What will you do, Your Majesty?" Shusei asked.

"What would you do?" Shohi groaned in response as he glared at Shusei.

"The delegation still hasn't said when they plan to leave, and it's true that they only arrived yesterday," Shusei said. "It may be best to humor his request today and wait for another chance to invite him to a meeting."

"Gulzari Shar is making a fool out of me," Shohi said in a frustrated voice. Shusei gave him a concerned look.

"I can't deny that. However, making him participate in meetings by force will only have the opposite effect. Please bear with it for now, Your Majesty," Shusei pleaded.

"Very well... I will leave it to you to decide how to entertain him. Discuss it with the Ministry of Rites. I do not care what you do or what you use," Shohi said, suppressing his anger.

Shohi sank into the sofa. Only then did he seem to realize that Rimi was there, and his eyes turned just a little brighter.

"Rimi? Did you come with the Quinary Dragon?" Shohi asked, and he searched the room for Tama. "Where did you put the Quinary Dragon, Rimi?"

"Um... Well... She's inside my skirt today," Rimi said.

Shohi fell silent. Rimi forced a smile. Shohi then let out a sigh longer than Rimi had ever heard from him.

"Again...? Never mind..." Exhausted, Shohi placed his chin in his hand.

Attempting to lighten the mood, Jotetsu walked up to the table and removed the lid from the breakfast congee placed there.

“Now, now, Your Majesty. Don’t be so disheartened. Why don’t you have some breakfast?” Jotetsu suggested.

“I do not want it. Have them take it away,” Shohi said as he feebly waved the food away before burying his face in the armrest.

I feel so sorry for His Majesty... He must have felt as if he was being made fun of from all directions. The stark contrast from how confidently he otherwise acted made Rimi feel even worse for him.

Shusei also gave Shohi a worried look.

“Enough. Shusei, Rimi, and you too, Jotetsu, leave, all of you. I wish to be left alone for a while,” Shohi commanded.

The three of them left Shohi’s room, and Jotetsu entered an adjacent room without saying anything. Rimi and Shusei were left standing alone in the cloister, hesitantly looking at each other.

“Rimi, are you all right?” Shusei asked in his usual, kind voice. His eyes seemed to want to say something, but Rimi could tell that he would never say it out loud, so she simply smiled back.

“Yes, I’m fine now.”

This exchange made them realize that they were both trying to suppress their feelings. Rimi felt a stinging pain in her chest, but she ignored it. Had she acknowledged her pain, she would have been unable to move.

“I’m worried about His Majesty. I’m counting on you for his supper today. I will think of ingredients that will help soothe him and have them delivered to you. Use them for His Majesty’s supper,” Shusei instructed.

“I will,” Rimi said. Her duty right now was making a satisfying meal out of Shusei’s ingredients and serving it to Shohi to relieve him from his worry. It was also what connected her to Shusei.

I have to make something His Majesty will like, Rimi thought and nodded to herself. This was the only way she could secure a place where she belonged.

She couldn't let herself get so caught up in love that she lost her place here, and she certainly couldn't let Shusei lose his position.

Rimi considered going to the cuisinology hall first, but she decided to go straight to the kitchen instead. It was her first time visiting the kitchen before evening. As she approached it, she could hear loud noises and voices coming from inside. She peeked into the kitchen and couldn't help but gasp.

All five stoves lined up against the wall were lit, and there was a cook clad in a white robe standing by each one. Koshin was one of them. They were repeatedly tossing food in pitch black pans from which steam rose accompanied by the sound of the ingredients being heated and an appetizing smell.

A number of cooks were also gathered by the countertop in the middle of the kitchen, skillfully slicing vegetables and meat. The piles of thinly sliced root vegetables grew at an astonishing pace. On one end of the countertop were large porcelain plates on which other cooks carefully placed the food. There were twenty-one cooks in total, each expertly carrying out their own tasks. The servants running between them were drenched in sweat and constantly yelled at, but whenever someone called out to them, they would respond energetically and promptly do as told.

"Hey! Are you done with the appetizers and the tang already?!" Koshin yelled at the people around him as he continued to toss his pan.

"The tang isn't done yet, sir. We're still waiting for the meatballs to add to it," a man responded.

"Hey, Ko!" Koshin yelled, looking over his shoulders while still keeping his hands busy. "Leave the steamed sweets for later! Help them out with the meatballs!"

"Yes, sir!" A servant boy who was working with flour responded and ran off to do as he was told.

Wow. I never realized how much organization was needed to make this amount of food. Breakfast had only just ended, yet they were already hard at work preparing for lunch. This was the only way that they would make it in time.

Breakfast and lunch were the main meals in Konkoku, while one would only have something light to eat for supper. Lunch in particular was usually the largest meal of the day, and the emperor's lunch would consist of appetizers, tang, a few main dishes, dessert, fruit, and more. Enough food was required for at least ten people as officials often joined the emperor at the table.

The tumult, the steam, and the smell of the lively kitchen were enough to overwhelm Rimi. When making food for her god in Wakoku, all defilement was forbidden, so Rimi had been the only one allowed in the kitchen. Even after coming to Konkoku, she would at most be joined by Shusei in the kitchen. She had never seen so many cooks gathered in one kitchen, dividing up the work amongst themselves.

Savory, sweet, spicy—all kinds of smells reached Rimi's nose.

I wonder how they go about creating a complicated scent like this in Konkokuan cuisine...

Rimi had learned the foundations of Konkokuan cooking, but the kind of intricate smells and tastes that the court cooks could produce was not something she could learn on her own. The smell seemed to behave somehow differently from the Konkokuan food that she made.

If I could incorporate this into my cooking when making His Majesty's meals, I could expand my repertoire greatly. That was also the reason Rimi had decided to visit the kitchen during the day.

Rimi looked on with great interest. She intently observed the ingredients used and how the cooks handled them. One of the cooks seemed to take notice of Rimi, and he was saying something to Koshin. Koshin glanced at Rimi, but immediately ignored her and got back to work. Rimi was happy that she wasn't being chased out and took the opportunity to continue studying what they were doing.

The kitchen only started to calm down once it was almost time for lunch. Waiters appeared and started carrying out the finished food as the cooks instructed. Once all the food was gone, the cooks left the kitchen in small groups. The job of cleaning the kitchen was left to the servants.

After the storm had passed from the kitchen, Koshin finally gave Rimi a proper

look.

“Hey, you. How long are you planning on clinging to that thing? Are you a mantis egg, or what?” Koshin said.

“Huh? Oh, me?” It seemed the “mantis egg” was referring to how Rimi clung motionlessly to a pillar.

“What are you up to?”

“I was watching.”

“Yes, I can tell that much! I’m asking what the hell you’re doing there watching!”

“It was just so interesting. The scent is different from the Konkokuan food I make. I wanted to see how you made it.”

Rimi slowly stepped into the kitchen and watched as the servants were carrying away cutting boards and pans. The servant boys seemed nervous in the presence of a palace woman and repeatedly glanced at Rimi.

Spring onion, garlic, and ginger are fundamental to making a fragrant dish. They’ve cut them into much smaller pieces than I usually do. Is this all it takes to produce such a strong scent? Rimi thought as she looked at the traces of the ingredients on the cutting boards.

“Follow me, Lady of Precious Bevy,” Koshin said, nodding at Rimi to join him in the western room where he was usually stationed.

Rimi entered the room, and Koshin sat down on a chair and removed the white cloth that had been covering his hair.

“Um, do you need something?” Rimi asked.

“The reason the fragrance of your food is so weak is because of the temperature of the pan,” Koshin said.

“Huh?” Rimi was taken off guard by the sudden remark, and Koshin gave her an annoyed look.

“You’re the one who said there’s a difference between the scent of your food and ours, goddammit!”

“O-Oh, yes! I did!” Rimi responded, straightening her back. She then realized that Koshin had just answered her question.

“You need to get a pretty high temperature going. Add seasoning to boiling oil, and you’ll get a strong scent right away. Remember to cut it finely. Also, what’re you using for seasoning right now?”

“Spring onion, garlic, and ginger.”

“There are plenty of other vegetables you can use too and a variety of possible combinations. Read the notes on the shelf over there labeled *A Collection of Seasonings*. I wrote them.”

Rimi stared fixedly at Koshin in surprise.

“What’s your problem?” Koshin said, seemingly finding Rimi’s gaze unsettling.

“Master Shusei is a scholar of cuisinology, but you’re a scholar of Konkokuan cuisine, Chief of Dining,” Rimi said as she smiled softly.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Shusei worked on researching the effects of foods, but Koshin’s work seemed to Rimi like research of Konkokuan cuisine. He had called the writing on the shelves “notes,” but they were proper books in their own right. They could help one master cooking, and Rimi thought that this too could be seen as a field of study. In any case, these notes represented an invaluable collection of knowledge.

Koshin frowned, not knowing how to handle the beaming palace woman in front of him when a servant suddenly barged in.

“Chief of Dining!” the servant yelled. “There is smoke coming from the Palace of Twin Dragons! There’s a fire!”

III

The imperial palace was in an uproar, and guardsmen hurried to the south. Rimi, Koshin, and the servant boys also ran toward the source of the smell of something burning. They looked up to see a thin, white pillar of smoke rising from the Palace of Twin Dragons.

The guardsmen who were trying to enter the palace faced trouble by the gate as some Saisakokuans were blocking the way, arguing with them. Both sides were yelling in their own native tongues, and neither had any idea what the other was saying. Someone could be heard calling for an interpreter.

“What is happening here?!” a familiar voice asked as its owner made his way past the guardsmen and officials gathered by the gate. It was Shusei. He had been busy preparing for the tour requested by the emissary but had run over upon seeing the commotion.

Shusei started speaking to the Saisakokuans in what appeared to be their own language. The Saisakokuans glanced at each other, and one of them ran inside. The white smoke rising from the palace cleared slightly.

After a while, a man clad in a long, perfectly tailored tunic appeared from inside the palace. The tunic was embroidered with vine patterns in gold and silver all over, and he had a soft silk band tied around his waist. Below his tunic was a slim skirt and a pair of pointy leather shoes. Silver accessories hung from his ears, which paired beautifully with his dark skin. He appeared to be in his early thirties. He had a slender and graceful build, and his attractive face made him look kind. His smile had an air of graceful gentleness about it.

As soon as the man appeared, Shusei greeted him with a deep Saisakokuan bow. Shusei’s demeanor made Rimi realize who the man was, and the people around them started whispering.

“Is that the emissary from Saisakoku?” someone said quietly.

“It’s Gulzari Shar!”

Rimi saw Shuri standing behind Gulzari Shar. Shar explained to Shusei what was happening, waved at Shuri to come closer, and smiled as he put his arm around Shuri’s shoulder. He seemed big-hearted from the way he treated his cook—but if all Saisakokuans were like Shuri, sharing a friendly demeanor but an unyielding determination and stubbornness, it was still too early to tell what Shar might be like.

Shusei looked concerned as he explained something to Shar.

I didn’t know Master Shusei could speak Saisakokuan too. He lived up to his

reputation as the finest scholar of Konkoku.

Shusei turned around to point toward the north of the imperial palace when he noticed Koshin and Rimi. He pointed at Koshin, then turned back to Shar and continued speaking. Shar was still smiling with his arm wrapped around Shuri, but as his gaze turned to Koshin and Rimi, his eyes opened wide. His eyes were clearly fixed on Rimi. Shar said something to Shusei, who shook his head. Shar continued to repeatedly say something, and Shusei shook his head each time before finally relenting and giving him a nod. Shusei walked over to Koshin and Rimi with a stumped expression.

“What happened, Cuisinologist?” Koshin asked, and Shusei sighed.

“Shuri was cooking in the Palace of Twin Dragons when he accidentally started a small fire. Apparently, they’ve already put it out.”

“There’s no kitchen in the Palace of Twin Dragons!” Koshin said in astonishment as Shusei furrowed his brow.

“Yes, indeed. So instead, they stacked rocks in the garden last night to act as a makeshift stove. It appears they have been using it since yesterday, but they had an accident when putting it out after preparing their lunch.”

“What are they thinking?!” Koshin groaned.

“The kitchen you run is the only one on the imperial palace grounds. So I’ve given Shuri permission to use your kitchen from now on. I’m sorry for not asking you in advance, but I hope you’ll understand. I don’t want the palace reduced to ashes.”

Seeing how exhausted Shusei was from dealing with the Saisakokuan delegation, even Koshin was unable to say no.

“Very well,” Koshin said.

“Rimi,” Shusei said with an even more apologetic tone. “Would you mind following me?”

“Huh? Follow you where?” Rimi asked.

“Inside the Palace of Twin Dragons. Prince Shar saw you and was overjoyed to see a woman here. I explained that you’re a woman of the rear palace and that

you're only here to serve His Majesty supper. However, that only made him all the more interested, and he said he wanted a chance to talk to you..."

"What?! No, I can't do that!" Rimi's voice cracked and she backed away.

"Of course, I'll ask for His Majesty's permission right away. But I'm sure he will allow it. I'll be right there next to you, interpreting for you."

There were no women in the outer palace of Konkoku. The delegation must have taken a great interest in Rimi as she was the first woman that they had seen on the palace grounds. Perhaps her dazzling clothing and hair ornaments, very unlike what the women of the town would wear, caught their attention too.

What do I do?

Rimi was being asked to meet with Gulzari Shar, the man that Emperor Shohi, Chancellor Shu Kojin, the officials, and even the Ho house and the merchant Ma Ijun were desperate to make contact with. If she backed away out of fear, she risked upsetting an important guest.

Master Shusei is doing his very best to welcome the delegation for the sake of His Majesty. Besides, if it meant she could be of some use to Shusei, she didn't want to turn him down.

"Master Shusei, do you think I should meet him?" Rimi asked, and Shusei made a pained expression.

"I would appreciate it if you would," Shusei said. Hearing this, Rimi made up her mind.

"Very well. I'll do it."

"I'm sorry to ask this of you. Thank you so much. Come with me."

Shusei, seemingly instinctively, reached out to take Rimi's hand. The moment their hands touched, both Rimi and Shusei immediately pulled them back as if shocked by electricity. They looked into each other's eyes. The feelings visible there were sweet enough to pierce their chests.

"Master Shusei..." Rimi said.

"I won't leave your side. Trust me."

Shusei's voice and his words were calming.



The main street had been cleared of snow, exposing the stone paving. The side roads, however, were still snow-covered; footprints and wheel tracks formed irregular patterns in the dirt-colored snow. Even so, the snow covering the eaves and gutters of the surrounding buildings made the capital of Annei look cleaner than usual. The entertainment district where pubs and teahouses could be found looked particularly cleaner than usual. The snow covered the gaudy buildings, softening the vulgar colors to something easier on the eye.

Carefully avoiding the wheel tracks in the snow, Hakurei walked toward a certain teahouse. He was wearing a coat as well as a cloth wrapped around his head to protect him from the cold and to hide his face. Hakurei's beauty would stand out too much otherwise. Though it may have still been bright out, walking alone through the entertainment district was bound to attract the attention of unsavory characters.

Teahouses were comparatively classy restaurants, and the women who worked there were proper and fully covered. Hakurei gave one of the waitresses the name of the person who had summoned him, and he was shown to a room on the second floor. He entered the room and walked around the divider placed in front of the doorway to find a brazier and a small, round table by the window.

An old man was sitting at the table. His hair and beard were white, but his skin was smooth and lustrous, his back was straight, and he seemed vigorous despite his old age. The waitress closed the door, and Hakurei removed the cloth around his head and bowed.

"I saw your letter. I am Sai Hakurei, a palace attendant. May I ask why you summoned me here, Lord Ho?" Hakurei asked.

The old man's name was Ho Neison, and he was usually referred to as Lord Ho. He belonged to the Ho house, a branch of the royal Ryu family, and he was the grandfather of Ho Hekishu—the current Virtuous Consort of the rear palace.

Over twenty days prior, the director of the Department of Service, I Bunryo, had given Hakurei a letter sent by Neison. Hakurei knew his name, but he had

never met him before, so the sudden letter bewildered him. To make matters even stranger, the letter contained a request to meet with Hakurei. Wary as Hakurei was, he had attempted to claim that he was busy as an excuse to postpone the meeting. But the letters only continued to arrive, and Bunryo also started demanding that Hakurei meet with Neison. In the end, Hakurei gave in and agreed to the meeting.

“Sit, Hakurei...or should I say, it would honor me if you would take a seat, Prince Hakurei?” Neison said.

Hakurei sat down at the table. He felt a strange sensation at the back of his neck that told him to stay alert.

“Would you care for tea?” Neison offered.

“That’s quite all right. Let’s skip the formalities. What is your reason for wanting to meet me? I would prefer it if you could be as direct as possible. I am quite busy with work, and I can’t stay here all day,” Hakurei said.

“I suppose Saisakoku’s delegation is keeping you busy?”

“I’m a mere palace attendant. The affairs of the outer palace do not concern me, but the inner palace is always busy.” Hakurei put on his usual vague, captivating smile as he gave Neison a curious look. “Did I disappoint you? Were you hoping I could introduce you to the emissary from Saisakoku? I hear you have been sending Virtuous Consort Ho letters asking the same lately. But I’m sorry to say that I have barely any contact with the emissary.”

“The thought of trading with Saisakoku is certainly appealing. As the Ho house, we have to protect our pride. However, our wealth is only a means to that,” Neison explained, waving away the suggestions. “What we value above all is our pride in having royal blood. I did not summon you here just to discuss Saisakoku. I’ll get straight to the point—Hakurei, do you have any interest in the throne?”

Hakurei’s eyes widened. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Oh, my... Now that’s not quite what I was expecting...” Hakurei’s mouth would not close, and he could not think of what to say. He was astonished at himself for how sloppy his remark had been. Neison, however, simply picked up

his teacup and brought it to his mouth.

“Do you believe the current emperor is worthy of the throne? He is young, has no patience nor experience, and is dreadfully lacking in prudence. Many officials visit the Ho house to share their worries for the future. They wish for someone more fitting to take the throne instead.”

“It’s only been one year since he ascended to the throne. It’s still too early to decide whether he possesses what is needed for an emperor.”

“By the time we know what he is capable of, it may already be too late. If there is a suitable candidate elsewhere, he should be given the throne instead as soon as possible. That is the opinion of the officials and the Ho house.”

“And I’m the ‘suitable candidate’ in question?” Hakurei chuckled. “Wouldn’t it be wiser to find Master Seishu and bring him back? Master Seishu’s mother is the sister of the emperor that ruled before the last one. There would be nothing strange about him taking the throne. I even heard that the court became divided into two factions at one point. One argued for Master Seishu to take the throne while the other supported the previous emperor.”

Seishu, Neison’s legitimate son, was noble and wise, and he descended from a prestigious lineage. Although it would normally have gone undisputed that the legitimate son to the emperor before the last—Shohi’s father—was next in line for the throne, Seishu had been such a remarkable character that the officials had ended up arguing about who should take the throne: Seishu, whose father had, at the time, garnered tremendous trust from the officials as the Minister of Rites and hailed from a royal family, or the unremarkable legitimate son of the emperor.

However, the struggle for the throne ended with the disappearance of Seishu. He suddenly went missing, and Shohi’s father ascended to the throne without competition.

“It’s been over twenty years since Seishu disappeared. I doubt he’s still alive,” Neison said.

“But if Master Seishu had a child, then that child would be closer to the throne than me,” Hakurei remarked.

“There is no point in searching for a child that might not even exist when we already have you.”

Neison seemed somewhat agitated, and Hakurei shot him a piercing glance.

“Please, Lord Ho, tell me the truth. You sent Lady Hekishu to the rear palace to regain the influence you had lost after being stripped of your authority. But now His Majesty has announced that no matter who bears his heir, he will belong to all four consorts,” Hakurei said. “In other words, even if Lady Hekishu were to bear his child, the Ho house would be unable to manipulate him. With no way to proceed, you are now desperately searching for another daring plan. You need to get your hands on a pawn you can use to maintain the Ho family’s power as quickly as possible.”

Until Neison’s generation, the direct successors of the Ho house had been serving the imperial court as officials, and Neison himself had been the Minister of Rites. However, at the same time that Neison retired from his post, Shu Kojin was appointed chancellor, which turned out disastrously for the Ho house. The people of the Ho house were stripped of their positions in the government and instead appointed to the prestigious post of adviser and bestowed first rank. However, in practice this meant being distanced from actual governing—all at the behest of Shu Kojin. It was an attempt to remove the Ho family, who were fond of opining on policy and causing trouble when it came to the ascension of the next emperor.

The Ho house then thought that as long as someone who descended from the Ho family sat on the throne, they could control him from the shadows—but that plan fell apart with the death of Virtuous Consort Sai. Next, they tried having Virtuous Consort Ho join the rear palace, but that idea also ended in failure after Shohi’s drastic declaration. With no easy path back to power, Neison must have started to panic. Otherwise, he never would have made contact with Hakurei.

“I suppose there’s no use in hiding it. Yes, you’re right,” Neison admitted. “At this rate, the Ho house will fall to ruin, just as the Ryus hope. I won’t let that happen. That’s why we have to place an emperor with Ho blood on the throne. Hakurei, you descend from the Ho family. If you so desire, the Ho house will support you, force the current emperor to abdicate, and put you on the throne

instead.”

The proposition was so ridiculous that Hakurei started laughing with his face down on the table. He was not even a direct descendant, only a blood relative. It was evident that, were he to take the throne with their support, the Ho house planned to make him do their bidding by exploiting his debt to them. The old man’s obsession and panicking were outright comical.

“What’s so funny?” Neison asked in a threatening tone.

“You don’t mean to tell me that you forgot, do you?” Hakurei said through his laughter. “I’m a eunuch. A eunuch can’t become the emperor.”

“There is a rumor that they took mercy on you during the procedure and that you remain a man.”

“It’s only a rumor.”

“I do not believe it.”

“Who do you think was there for the procedure? It was none other than Shu Kojin.”

“But there is no smoke without fire. You can’t explain this as a simple rumor. Prove it to me now.”

“Prove it? Do you want me to take off my clothes? I am not humiliating myself in that way.” Hakurei stood up and looked down at Neison with cold eyes. “I will keep what happened here to myself. But be careful, Lord Ho, or there will be heads flying.”

Hakurei turned his back to Neison and left the room.

A man observed Hakurei leaving the teahouse from the shadows of a building. It was Jotetsu. After Hakurei had disappeared into the crowd, Jotetsu stepped on a wheel track in the cold, hard snow, and into the sun.

“The bell finally rang,” he mumbled with a grin.

Chapter 4: Can a Beauty Rock a Country?

I

Important foreign guests would stay at the Palace of Twin Dragons. The reception hall in the center of the palace was painted with black lacquer and decorated with gold leaves in the shape of dragons, giraffes, and phoenixes. It was dizzyingly magnificent. But peeking out through the doors of that splendid hall, left open to let in the sunlight, Rimi and Shusei were met with the sorry sight that was the current state of the garden outside.

Under normal circumstances, the trees and plants in the garden would be covered in snow, creating a beautiful picture. Now, however, the snow in the middle of the garden had been removed, and in its place were garden stones stacked to form something akin to a stove. The stones were covered with soot, and there was ash littered all over that smelled burnt. The trees and shrubberies nearby were burned to cinders. Pots and bowls were lying on the ground with cut vegetables spread out next to them.

“What in the world have they done to the Garden of Dragon Wisdom...?” Shusei seemed overwhelmed by the sight and put his hand on his forehead.

The leader of Saisakoku’s delegation, Gulzari Shar, gave Shusei and Rimi an innocent smile as he asked them to take a seat, instructing Shuri to bring them tea. Shuri soon returned with a silver tea set that had containers with thin handles. He poured a light brown liquid that smelled like aged tea leaves into the cups. Rimi took a sip, tasting a bewitchingly sweet and mellow flavor with a hint of cow’s milk. The tea seemed to have been scented with cinnamon and ginger.

“It’s lovely,” Rimi said.

Shar, who was sitting right in front of her, smiled even wider as he said something.

“He says it’s Saisakokuan tea,” Shusei, who was next to Rimi, quickly

interpreted. "It's made by boiling fermented tea leaves and then adding cow's milk and sugar, along with some spices."

"It's almost like a sweet," Rimi said, smiling softly, and Shar smiled back at her.

Shuri said something to Shar, whose eyes widened in surprise, and Shar turned to Rimi to say something.

"He says, 'Shuri just informed me that you're from Wakoku. I had no idea. I don't know much about Wakoku,'" Shusei said.

"People from Saisakoku aren't very familiar with Wakoku, are they? Is that because Wakoku is such a small country?" Rimi asked Shusei.

"I think it's less that it's a small country and more that it's physically distant," Shusei answered after thinking for a bit. "You have to cross the sea to get to it, after all. But I'm sure that's all the more reason that they would be interested. You wouldn't happen to have anything from Wakoku on you right now?"

"Oh, I do have this." Rimi searched her sleeve and took out a small paper package, which contained kaorizuke. She always brought some to have with tea, and as she hadn't passed by the cuisinology hall today, she still had it on her.

"This will surely fascinate them," Shusei assured her as he explained in Saisakokuan that this was food from Wakoku.

Rimi opened the package, and Shar and Shuri curiously observed its contents.

"Please, have some," Rimi said.

This was apparently simple enough for Shar to understand, and he and Shuri each enthusiastically picked up a piece of the kaorizuke and put it in their mouths. A crunching sound could be heard as they bit into the kaorizuke, and they exchanged glances. Shar said something with a smile, and Rimi could tell that he must have said something along the lines of "this tastes good," or "this isn't half bad."

"Prince Shar, have you ever traveled to countries other than Konkoku?" Rimi asked, and Shusei translated. Shar happily answered.

“He says that he has been to the three small countries in the south that Saisakoku trades with, the so-called Southern Trinity. Prince Shar is the younger brother of Saisakoku’s emperor, so he often visits the Trinity for inspections. He also said that he would like to go to Wakoku one day,” Shusei explained.

“Oh, yes, by all means! I have a sister who lives in Wakoku. She’s very pretty,” Rimi said. Hearing Shusei interpret what she said, Shar smiled and touched her cheek gently.

“He says that you are adorable too,” Shusei said.

The way Shar touched Rimi was similar to how one might comfort a cute puppy, and Shusei looked on with an awkward expression.

“This ‘adorable’ is used when talking about small girls,” Shuri added with a mischievous smile. “Prince Shar thinks you look like a child.”

Shar tapped Shuri on the back of his hand, said something, and smiled.

He’s a very approachable person, Rimi thought. He even treated his own cook in a friendly way. The same was true with how he spoke to Rimi. Given how many selfish requests he had made, Rimi had assumed Shar would be arrogant, but he was far from it. He was approachable, cheerful, and treated everyone the same. Rimi had taken a liking to him.

As a calm atmosphere filled the room, a man from the delegation suddenly entered. He whispered something into Shar’s ear. The prince’s face froze for a moment, but he immediately restored his smile as he signaled with his hand to let someone in. The man nodded and left the room, and another man soon took his place.

“Your Majesty!” Shusei exclaimed.

The man who had appeared was none other than Shohi, and he entered the room followed by several aides. Shusei and Rimi hurriedly stood up and bowed, but Shar leisurely stood up and turned to Shohi with a smile.

“I heard there was a fire here, so I came to have a look,” Shohi said. “I hope you were not hurt, Prince Shar?”

Shusei translated Shohi’s question. Shar smiled and shrugged his shoulders to

indicate that he was fine.

“If you would like, I shall have the garden put back in order. It will be noisy in the meantime, so I would like to invite you to tea in the Hall of Enlightenment until they are done,” Shohi suggested. Shusei interpreted for him, but Shar shook his head.

“Your Majesty, Prince Shar says that he is fine with the garden as it is and declines your invitation,” Shusei said as he frowned. “He says that he is tired and would prefer to rest today.”

But he doesn't seem tired at all, and he doesn't seem to be resting either... Shar looked like the very embodiment of cheer. Since even Rimi could see this, it was no surprise that Shohi seemed to as well, and he ever so slightly bit his lip.

“How dare you make a fool out of me...” Shohi grumbled.

“Your Majesty,” Shusei sternly warned Shohi.

“Tell him that I understand, and I am happy to see that he is safe. I am leaving. Shusei, I need your advice on something. Follow me.”

Shar bid Shohi farewell with a Saisakokuan bow as the emperor turned around to leave. Shusei explained what Shohi had said. Shar gestured that he didn't mind, and Shusei gave him a Saisakokuan bow before turning to Rimi.

“Rimi, I need to leave with His Majesty. I was planning on taking you with me, but Prince Shar says he would like to talk with you for a little while longer, so I will send for an interpreter. I'm sorry. I know I promised that I would be here with you,” Shusei said.

“It's fine, Master Shusei. If His Majesty needs you, then you have to go. That's...to be expected.”

They exchanged glances, and Rimi felt a sweet yet stinging sensation in her chest. Shusei also looked somehow sad.

“Thank you, Rimi. If anything happens, be sure to send for me right away. I'll come running,” Shusei reassured her.

Shusei gave Shar a final quick bow before he exited the room and

disappeared from sight. Rimi continued staring into nothingness, as if chasing his mirage with her eyes.

“Is Shusei your lover then, Rimi?” a voice behind her suddenly asked.

“Huh? W-W-Wait, what?!” Rimi turned around expecting the voice to belong to Shuri, only to find Shar sitting casually in his chair, smiling at her with a silver teacup in his hand.



“Oh, am I wrong? You two certainly looked intimate to me,” Shar said in fluent Konkokuan.

“Huh...? Prince Shar...? Konkokuan...?” Rimi had trouble processing the situation.

Prince Shar can... He can... He can speak Konkokuan after all! Oh no, oh no, I can't believe it... What a devious man...!

“Prince Shar, why would you pretend not to speak Konkokuan...?” Rimi couldn't stop herself from asking.

“Why else? To avoid having to take part in long, tiresome talks, of course,” Shar said as he laughed heartily.

“Then why are you using Konkokuan with me?”

“It's just too bothersome having to speak through an interpreter.” Shar teasingly winked at her. “Even if you report to the Konkokuans that I can speak the language, I'll just adamantly deny it. I'm sure the Konkokuans will grumble about the obvious lie, but it's not as if they can accuse me publicly.”

Shar had not one hint of guilt in his eyes, and Rimi was so astonished that she couldn't speak.

“Now, have a seat, my Wakokuan princess,” Shar continued in perfect Konkokuan. “It's tea time, after all. Just relax and enjoy it. I'll chase away any interpreters that show up, so you can take it easy. You all, join us too!”

Shar yelled toward the back of the room, and the people from the delegation flooded in. Some of them introduced themselves as diplomats or military officers. But there were also many boys who were clearly there as Shar's attendants. They poured tea from the pot on the table without asking and started talking merrily near Shar—the emperor's own brother. They all spoke in Saisakokuan, so Rimi had no idea what they were saying, but it seemed to be some form of banter. The boys were joking and laughing.

Prince Shar is the brother of the emperor of Saisakoku. Are servants really allowed to have tea with him like this? Diplomats and military officers were one thing, but even servants joining him for tea was a culture shock.

“Just so you know, this isn’t normal in Saisakoku. Prince Shar is special,” Shuri explained upon seeing Rimi’s surprised face.

“Special?” Rimi asked.

“Normally, not even I would be allowed to have tea with royals. I wouldn’t even be allowed to talk to them other than on special occasions.”

“Then why...”

“Prince Shar allows those around him to do as they want. He doesn’t like discriminating. Prince Shar is special.”

“So you mean that he’s eccentric?”

“That’s right. But His Imperial Majesty relies on Prince Shar. Prince Shar is wise. But some people badmouth him by saying that he’s ‘good at taking in strays.’”

““Strays?””

“That’s us,” Shuri said as he gave a self-deprecating smile.

“What do you mean?”

“The reason Prince Shar decided to have you stay behind for tea is that he felt sorry for you having to come here alone from Wakoku and wanted to take you in. I’m sure of it.”

“Do you have enough tea, Rimi?” Shar, who was surrounded by three of what appeared to be his attendants, suddenly interjected.

“I’m quite fine. Thank you for asking, Prince Shar.”

“Do you have any more of that Wakokuan food?”

“Well, I do have more back in the rear palace.”

“Then, would you mind coming here again some other day? I would like to try more of it.”

Shuri’s eyes widened in response to Shar’s suggestion.

“Did you enjoy the strange food that much, Prince Shar?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Shar smiled.

One of the boys standing next to Shar tapped him on the shoulder and raised his voice to get the prince's attention back. Shar turned back to the boys. The room was lively, yet peaceful.

I can't believe how different the attitudes of Konkoku and Prince Shar are. Rimi couldn't help but notice how differently Shar acted from Shohi. One was sitting leisurely as if playing a card game, while the other acted as if he was readying his sword for sparring. With attitudes this different, it was difficult to see how they would ever manage to have any fruitful talks.

After a little while had passed, Rimi stood up.

"I'll be leaving now. I need to start preparing for His Majesty's supper," Rimi announced. As she was leaving, Shar welcomed her back anytime.

Rimi stepped outside of the Palace of Twin Dragons and started walking toward the kitchen when she heard light footsteps approaching her quickly from behind. She turned around to find Shuri running toward her, holding a large, sturdy wooden box with a lid.

"What's the matter?" Rimi asked.

"I'm also making supper for Prince Shar and everyone else now. Master Shusei said that I can use the kitchen starting today," Shuri replied.

"Oh, yes, that's right, because of the fire... Are those the ingredients?"

"These are spices. I'll get the food in the kitchen."

While Koshin had agreed to let Shuri use the kitchen, he had not been given much of a choice. It wasn't hard to imagine a quarrel or two breaking out if Shuri attempted to cook food there.

"Does Prince Shar hate Konkokuan cuisine that much?" Rimi asked.

"He doesn't like it or hate it. If he is told to eat it, he will eat it. He has had it many times before, but that is all. He isn't interested in Konkokuan food. However, he says that he likes my Saisakokuan food."

Rimi found the way Shuri spoke with a smile on his face heartwarming.

"Shuri, you must really love Prince Shar."

“I do. I love him a lot. After all...” Shuri spoke boldly as he turned his eyes toward the snow-covered bamboo. “He took me in.”

“You said something like that before too. What does that mean?”

“I and the other boys are all people who normally wouldn’t be allowed to serve a royal. We are all people who were wasting away on the streets, abandoned by their families, or about to be sold. Whenever Prince Shar finds someone like that, he will take them in and make them an attendant, cook, or a horse caretaker.” Shuri suddenly gave a dissatisfied pout. “But Prince Shar takes in too many—so many that he becomes confused and sometimes even forgets my name.”

How cute. He’s like a child. As the man aired his grievances about his master forgetting his name, Rimi felt as though—perhaps due to the mole under his eye—he would have looked very alluring under certain circumstances, but here he instead looked like an adorable young boy.

“It must be frustrating to be called the wrong name by someone you love,” Rimi said.

“I’m less frustrated and more worried,” Shuri explained.

“Worried? About what?”

“I’m worried that he’ll forget I exist.”

Across Shuri’s face flashed not childish discontent but intense fear. He had mentioned that Shar had taken him in, but Rimi couldn’t help but wonder what kind of life he had led until then. Being so anxious about his master forgetting about him must have been a result of his past life. It could not have been a pleasant life.

“That’s why I always make him his favorite food. If I give him good food every day, he won’t forget me, right?” Shuri said.

Shuri smiled and laugh lines appeared at the corners of his eyes. Shuri seemed to desire something similar to what Rimi wanted—cooking food to make someone happy. In Shuri’s case, that someone was specifically Shar, but Rimi understood the feeling well.

Shar had turned out to be rather devious, but he was not fond of discrimination, and he would take in abandoned children. The fact that his servants loved him was proof of what a great master he was.

Prince Gulzari Shar might be a good man, but he is so different from His Majesty, and he has absolutely no intention to talk to him. Rimi wondered how best to go about solving this situation. Making the negotiations with Saisakoku proceed smoothly was also one of Shusei's duties, and Rimi thought that just maybe she could use the information she had learned to help him in some way.

II

The two of them arrived in the kitchen, and Shuri placed the wooden box on the center counter and removed the lid. A strong, complicated fragrance emanated from it. Rimi instinctively walked up to it to have a look. A large number of small pots were packed into the box, each containing spices ground into a fine powder in various vivid colors—red, yellow, green, and brown.

“Wow. How many spices are there?” Rimi asked.

“About three hundred,” Shuri replied.

“Are you using all of them?!”

“Not all at once. I combine them. I will use about a dozen.”

Rimi had never tried or even seen Saisakokuan cuisine before. She became excited as she imagined what kind of food you could make with dozens of spices.

“What are you making?” Rimi asked inquisitively.

“Bean kari.”

“Bean” was Konkokuan, but “kari” was a Saisakokuan word Rimi had never heard before.

“What's ‘carry’?”

“‘Kari.’ It's a type of stew made with spices. I can make enough for the whole delegation in one go since it's easy to make a lot all at once.”

“Really? Can I watch? I will be here anyway to make His Majesty’s supper.”

“Yes, sure. I’m not using any secret techniques, it’s a standard Saisakokuan dish.”

Candlelight was dancing in Koshin’s room on the west side of the kitchen. Rimi peeked into the room to find Koshin sitting by his desk as usual, making notes in what looked like a ledger. “I can’t stand this one bit” seemed to be written all over his face.

“I will be using the kitchen,” Rimi said, asking Koshin for permission as she always did.

“Whatever.”

In the kitchen, Shuri was happily picking spices from the box.

“Also, as Master Shusei said already, the cook from Saisakoku, Shuri, will be using the kitchen starting today,” Rimi informed Koshin.

“That goddamn brat who spouted some nonsense about Konkokuan food being bad? He can shove it! But the cuisinologist already gave him permission, so just do whatever you want,” Koshin vented.

“I’m very sorry. We appreciate it,” Rimi said and exited the room.

I can’t fault the Chief of Dining for being angry... Someone flatly rejecting your food would make anyone angry. Rimi also thought that Shuri was being too stubborn, but at the same time, this was a unique opportunity to lay her eyes on a completely new kind of food. While she felt sorry for Koshin, Rimi couldn’t help but be excited.

Rimi told Shuri where he could find the tinder, the cookware, and the food storage. Shuri immediately got to work. He searched the pantry for dried beans and then soaked them in water. Next, he lit the tinder and used it to light a stove. While he waited for the fire to spread, he chose over a dozen spices, mixed them together, and ground them in a mortar. A strong scent drifted through the kitchen.

I’ve never smelled something like this before. It’s a wonderful aroma.

Rimi became absorbed in Shuri’s work, but she soon caught herself. She

wasn't there just to satisfy her curiosity—she had her own duty to attend to. So, Rimi got started on Shohi's supper.

She looked around the kitchen for the ingredients that Shusei had sent her, and she noticed a small basket shaking faintly by the water storage. Rimi cautiously looked inside to find it stuffed with small crabs. There was a note from Shusei next to the basket.

"These are very rare river crabs. During winter they can be found sleeping in the mud by riverbanks, which is where I dug them up. They improve your physical health and calm your psyche. However, note that the shell must be eaten too," the message read.

"The shell too..."

Rimi tried poking at the shell of one crab. As expected, it was rock solid.

And if they were dug up from the mud, they probably taste like it too...

The shell could be made crunchy and edible by deep frying it twice. The real problem was the muddy taste. Even when deep-fried, the shell would still be too hard to chop into fine pieces. So, unlike the mushroom, it would be difficult to remove the taste using the same method. Either way, using the same cooking technique every time might make Shohi grow tired of her food.

As Rimi was deep in thought, Shuri put the finely ground spices into an empty pot on the lit stove. A fragrance immensely stronger than before started spreading through the kitchen.

"What an incredible smell," Rimi mumbled as she looked behind her. Seemingly also drawn in by the smell, Koshin popped his head out through the doorway with wide eyes.

Shuri noticed Rimi and Koshin's curious gazes and gave them both a confident smile. He put the roasted spices on a plate before relentlessly frying onion and garlic in the same pot, only stopping just before they were about to be burnt brown.

"If you fry it that much, the taste of the seasoning will vanish," Koshin said dubiously.

In Konkokuan cuisine, it was important to make the very most of the fragrance and taste of the seasoning. Rimi agreed that frying it to mush as Shuri had done seemed like it would ruin the fragrance.

“I will use the spices for the aroma. This is to give the food more depth and sweetness,” Shuri explained.

Shuri put the soaked beans into the pot along with water and spices. A pleasant fragrance rose from the pot. He then stirred the mixture and brought it to a boil. The smell grew more intense.

This was different from both Wakokuan and Konkokuan cooking. The unique smell stimulated Rimi’s appetite as well as her curiosity. Anyone, not just Rimi, would have been drawn in by this smell. Even Koshin was still looking on, staring at the stove.

So this is Saisakokuan cooking... It uses copious amounts of the spices that other countries are so desperate for. Anyone would have their interest piqued after smelling something like this.

Rimi then remembered what Shuri had said before. Shar neither liked nor hated Konkokuan food—he simply wasn’t interested in it. Konkoku had a great interest in Saisakoku’s spices, but Saisakoku’s emissary Gulzari Shar was wholly uninterested in Konkoku. That was the cause of the differing attitudes and enthusiasm of Konkoku and Saisakoku, and also why the negotiations weren’t making any headway.

He’s not interested... Rimi suddenly had an idea.

“Shuri!” Rimi exclaimed, running up to Shuri. “Please, could you teach me Saisakokuan cooking, right now? I want to use Saisakokuan techniques for His Majesty’s supper!”

“Why?” Shuri asked.

“Because it seems so tasty!”

Seeing how excited Rimi was, Shuri gave her a pleased nod.

“It is tasty. Do you want to try it?” Shuri said, pouring some of the kari liquid onto a plate and offering it to Rimi.

Rimi took a sip, and a tingling sensation hit her mouth while an indescribable fragrance filled her nostrils. She gasped at the overwhelming aroma.

“What an incredible fragrance,” Rimi said.

“I’ll teach it to you,” Shuri offered.

“Thank you. I want to cook those crabs. Is that possible?”

“Kari works with anything. Or rather, you can *make* it work with anything,” Shuri said with a happy smile.

This stroke of fortune had Rimi’s heart racing with excitement. Perhaps she would be able to not only serve Shohi a satisfying dish but also find a hint that could help solve the problem troubling Shusei and Shohi.

Rimi heated oil in a pot before adding the crabs whole and deep-frying them, letting them slowly cook all the way through before removing them again. She then adjusted the position of the pot, let the oil boil as hot as possible, and added the crabs back into the furiously bubbling oil. She let the pot sit for a short while before removing the crabs again.

With the initial preparations done, Rimi chopped the vegetables used for seasoning and fried them thoroughly in a pot as Shuri had done.



“I cannot believe his disrespect!” Shohi grumbled as he angrily paced around like a captured animal. “I will chase that impudent emissary out of the imperial palace this instant! I do not want to see another Saisakokuan!”

“Your Majesty, consider what would happen if you did that,” Shusei desperately tried to calm Shohi.

“I am aware!”

Shohi did not need anyone to tell him that if he gave himself over to his rage, he would be branded an incompetent emperor who lost an excellent opportunity to negotiate with Saisakoku. That was why he had taken Shusei with him from the Palace of Twin Dragons to consult with him on how to handle the situation. The moment Shohi had arrived in his room, however, his anger had reached its limit, and he had started yelling at Shusei. It was nothing more

than him taking out his anger on someone else.

Shohi threw himself onto the sofa and stared at the ceiling as he bit his lip, lamenting how pathetic he must have seemed.

“Gulzari Shar has no intention whatsoever of discussing with us properly,” Shohi said.

“Yes, I suspect you are right,” Shusei replied sadly.

“Tell me, Shusei. How am I supposed to negotiate with someone who will not even speak to me?”

“I assume they sent the emissary to avoid the risk of worsening their relationship with us, even if they are wholly uninterested in actually establishing diplomatic relations with us,” Shusei surmised. “With such a makeshift delegation, it was clear from the start that negotiations would prove difficult.”

“Then I shall threaten them with an attack.”

“Geographically speaking, there is little benefit to attacking Saisakoku. It is also not realistic. Using the threat of invasion as a bargaining tactic means risking the threat turning into a reality,” Shusei explained. “If your bluff goes so far that you can’t retract it, and we do end up attacking Saisakoku, you will face fierce criticism from inside Konkoku.”

“Then what do you propose I do?!”

Shusei shook his head.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a solution yet. For one, I don’t know much about Gulzari Shar and how he thinks. I need more time,” Shusei said.

“And while you take your time to learn about him, the delegation will leave Konkoku.”

Since he had known him since childhood, Shohi felt a sense of safety whenever he spoke with Shusei that no matter how arrogantly he acted, Shusei would forgive him. To Shohi, who had few people he could consider allies, Shusei was the only person he could truly trust. At times he even thought of him almost as an older brother. But Shusei himself always kept in mind his

position as Shohi's retainer, and he had never acted overly familiar with him. That was part of what made him trustworthy, but at the same time, it made Shohi sad.

"Yes, I fear you may be right," Shusei said. "We need to think of something."

Shusei looked down and started thinking. No matter how much Shohi and Shusei discussed it between the two of them, the problem fundamentally lay with Shar's attitude, something that would not be easy to change.

As the two of them reached a dead end and a heavy silence fell upon the room, a rich fragrance suddenly made its way in.

"Your Majesty, I have brought your supper." Rimi's voice could be heard outside the door. It appeared that the sun had set without Shohi realizing it.

"Enter," Shohi ordered, and Rimi quietly walked into the room carrying Shohi's supper as usual.

Shohi instinctively looked at Shusei to observe his reaction. He was still unable to stop thinking about what to do if the two of them truly had feelings for each other. But Shusei remained expressionless as he observed Rimi, and Rimi only glanced at Shusei and gave him a quick bow when their eyes met. They both acted naturally and appropriately distant.

Rimi? And Shusei too. Shohi could sense no hint of yearning for Shusei from Rimi, and Shusei was also the same as ever. *I thought Rimi had feelings for Shusei. Was I mistaken?*

Perhaps Rimi had simply been embarrassed to be seen in such a risqué position, and she would have reacted the same if it were Jotetsu or Hakurei, not just Shusei. Meanwhile, Shusei had worn the usual expression of the Loveless Scholar.

If that is the case... Shohi realized that he felt relieved from the bottom of his heart and gave a dejected smile. Now wasn't the time to think about this. He had to focus on the question at hand, that of Saisakoku's emissary.

Rimi placed a bowl on the table and from it emanated a fragrance richer than anything Shohi had smelled before. Shusei also looked at it quizzically.

“Were you busy talking? If you prefer, I can save the supper for later,” Rimi said.

“No, it is fine. I will eat it now. Shusei, join me,” Shohi demanded.

“Very well, Your Majesty,” Shusei replied. “But what is this made from? I believe today’s ingredient was supposed to be river crabs. River crabs don’t smell like this.”

“It’s made with river crabs,” Rimi said, smiling gently.

Rimi asked Shohi and Shusei to sit down and removed the lid from the bowl. The fragrance grew even more intense, and Shohi and Shusei’s eyes widened as they observed the contents.

“These are Saisakoku-style river crabs,” Rimi explained happily.

“Saisakoku-style...?” Shohi was clearly averse to the food. The idea of eating something from the country of someone who had been disrespectful to him only made him angry.

“I promise, it tastes good,” Rimi said innocently as she scooped the food onto plates.

On the plate in front of Shohi were small crabs half the size of a palm, cooked together with unbelievably fragrant spices. Though he was reluctant, the scent piqued Shohi’s interest, and he picked up his chopsticks. As the crab approached his mouth, the aroma tingled his nose. With each crunchy bite, a sweet taste filled his mouth along with the fragrance, stimulating multiple senses at once. It was a curious experience, and he found himself wanting even more.

“This is very good,” Shusei said, surprised, as he swallowed. “I expected these crabs to taste muddy, but I can’t taste the mud at all. Is this thanks to the spices?”

“Shuri shared some of the spices he had mixed with me. He said that this is a traditional, homely taste in Saisakoku,” Rimi explained.

Suddenly, Shohi put his chopsticks down as if he had lost all appetite.

“‘Homely,’ you say?” Shohi grumbled. “A dish that makes use of this amount

of spices is ‘homely’? Spices are worth as much as gold in trade. Saisakoku produces enough spices for even commoners to use regularly. It would be as if the people of Saisakoku are eating gold bars for dinner every day.”

III

What would a country where commoners eat gold bars for dinner stand to gain from establishing relations with Konkoku? That would be the obvious question to ask. Saisakoku was most likely several times richer than Konkoku. There were few ways Konkoku could gain the upper hand against such a country. The only way Shohi could think of was using military strength.

As Shohi despaired over the hopeless situation, Rimi looked at him with a serious gaze.

“Your Majesty, you are interested in Saisakokuan cuisine—in spices, aren’t you?” Rimi asked.

“Of course I am. And not just me—there is not a person in the court or a single merchant who is not,” Shohi responded somewhat self-deprecatingly at the trial that he had been forced to undertake.

“Earlier today, I spoke with Prince Gulzari Shar in the Palace of Twin Dragons. I don’t believe that Prince Shar hates Konkoku. He just has no interest at all in the country. He’s the very opposite of the people of Konkoku, who are very interested in Saisakoku,” Rimi explained.

“Even I can tell as much, and I have not even had a proper conversation with him,” Shohi replied bitterly.

“But then I thought of something when I was observing the Chief of Dining.”

“What about him?”

“The Chief of Dining was very angry about how rude he thought a cook from Saisakoku was being. But even he became extremely interested when that cook started making food,” Rimi said. “The Chief of Dining has no interest in Saisakoku, but he *is* interested in cooking, so no matter how angry he was, he couldn’t suppress his curiosity.”

“So?” Shohi asked, still unable to understand what Rimi was getting at. Rimi smiled.

“So I think what we need to do is show Prince Shar something that draws even his attention. Something that Konkoku is proud of that could interest him. That way he will inevitably become interested in the country itself.”

“That is if such a thing even exists,” Shohi scoffed. “Saisakoku is a country so rich that commoners nonchalantly use something worth as much as gold without a second thought. What could we possibly have to show him?”

“Konkoku may only be a little over a hundred years old as a country, but the people have a history that spans over a thousand years. That’s a richer history than Saisakoku’s, isn’t it? I’ve heard that it’s only been a few hundred years since Saisakoku’s current dynasty began. Before that, it consisted of independent tribes that led simple lives.”

Konkoku, which spanned most of the greater part of the continent, was founded only a century ago. Before then, however, the countries of Yokoku, Hankoku, and Shokukoku each existed for dynasties spanning at least a hundred years. And before the five-decades-long “Warring States Period” that preceded them, there was the ancient nation of Kyukoku. While Konkoku itself had a short history, that was only a matter of changing dynasties—the actual civilization had existed for a millennium.

Konkoku possessed a millennium’s worth of knowledge, technology, and culture. Meanwhile, Wakoku and Saisakoku had—perhaps as a result of their abundant resources—not formed a proper country until some centuries prior, before which they only existed as a collection of smaller tribes.

“I think there is more to this country than just its economy. When I first arrived in Konkoku, I was amazed by its art and architecture,” Rimi explained.

Shohi’s eyes widened.

I had never thought of it myself, but... I see... Shohi had never considered it before, but it was true that the fruits of a thousand-year-old civilization must have value in and of itself. As someone who had grown up in the middle of it, he had failed to realize it, but as a Wakokuan, Rimi was able to tell what was fascinating about Konkoku.

“I think people tend to desire what they don’t have. Konkoku has many things that Saisakoku doesn’t, and if you show Prince Shar the thing that might draw his attention the most, I’m sure he will become interested in Konkoku,” Rimi explained.

“And what do you think that would be, Shusei?” Shohi asked.

Shusei put a finger on his chin and started to think.

“Well, it would not be something strictly profitable, that’s for sure. The thing that might make him actively interested...” Shusei suddenly looked up.

“People!”

Shohi and Rimi looked at him with puzzled expressions. Shusei turned to Rimi.

“Earlier today, when the fire broke out, Rimi caught Prince Shar’s eye. He was surprised to see a woman. At first I thought it might be her gorgeous palace woman’s attire that caught his attention, but I think he simply has an interest in people. Otherwise, he would never be so intimate with his own cook. If nothing else, he must be fascinated with people,” Shusei said.

“Oh!” Rimi exclaimed. “Shuri told me that Prince Shar hates discrimination and likes to take people in and have them work for him.”

Shusei nodded, seemingly convinced by what Rimi had said.

“Your Majesty,” Shusei continued. “Prince Shar’s main interest is people. If we make use of that fact, we can make him interested in Konkoku too. We simply need to convince him that Konkokuans are funny or worthy of spending time with.”

“That is easier said than done. How do you suggest we do that?” Shohi asked.

“It’s just as Rimi said—we have to show Prince Shar that the people of Konkoku are noble and cultured enough to captivate him.”

The first person that came to Shohi’s mind upon hearing the words “noble” and “cultured” was Shusei. But it was unlikely that Shusei would draw Shar’s attention at a glance. Were Shar to spend much time with him, he might understand and be impressed with how noble and cultured he was, but right now they needed something much simpler, something you could see at first

glance. What they needed most of all was someone gorgeous.

Rimi stared into the air before smiling as though she just remembered something.

“Now that I think about it, there were a few people who captivated me from the bottom of my heart when I first came to Konkoku. Some incredibly beautiful, refined people,” Rimi said.

“I see!” Shohi said, realizing who Rimi was referring to. “The four consorts!”

“Oh!” Shusei exclaimed.

Rimi, however, sent the two a puzzled gaze, apparently not understanding what the other two were thinking.

“The ones that captivated you are the four consorts, correct?” Shohi asked.

“Well, yes,” Rimi replied.

“We will have Gulzari Shar meet the four consorts.”

“Yes,” Shusei agreed. “The consorts are beautiful, cultured, and refined. Why don’t we invite Prince Shar to a feast where he will lay his eyes on them? That feast will also be the perfect opportunity to introduce him to Konkokuan culture.”

“I am leaving for the rear palace right away. Inform the Department of Service that I am coming and tell Hakurei to gather the consorts,” Shohi commanded, and Shusei quickly left the room.

Part of Shohi found it all ridiculous. His goal was to establish relations with Saisakoku, not to entertain the emissary to get on his good side. He feared that humoring him would only make Shar even more arrogant. Still, with the prince having no intention of agreeing to talk and showing no interest in Konkoku, they had arrived at a standstill. But then, Shohi had given it some reflection. He had been on his guard in the name of diplomacy, only focusing on how to force Shar to agree to negotiate, but perhaps that had been the wrong approach. If you instead viewed diplomacy as forging a bond between people, then the first step should be to get to know each other and then slowly build your relationship.

Had Shohi made Rimi his by force, then even though she would have belonged to him, she would have resented him deep down and refused to open up to him. And just like he was slowly trying to get closer to her so that he wouldn't upset her, diplomacy must start by becoming acquainted with the other party.

It may have seemed ridiculous and astoundingly roundabout, but it was the only path forward that they had found.



It was the first time since his coronation that the emperor made an official visit to the rear palace. Though he had been late to do so with over a year having passed already, the rear palace was in turmoil at the sudden news. The palace women were excitedly gossiping about whose palace he might visit, but in the end, the palace to light up was the currently unoccupied Palace of Northern Peaks, built for the empress to reside in. Hearing that all four consorts had gathered there, the palace women let out disappointed sighs. It seemed that the emperor had only come to see how the consorts were doing, not to visit the bedchamber of a particular concubine.

The consorts themselves were very confused. After arriving at the main hall of the Palace of Northern Peaks and sitting down at the table that had been brought there, they asked Hakurei, who was standing by near the wall, why they had been summoned out of the blue. But although Hakurei had been the one to arrange the meeting, he had not been informed of its purpose either.

Shohi entered the rear palace with Rimi in tow. Ideally, Shusei would have accompanied them as well, but as he was forbidden from entering the rear palace, he was waiting in the outer palace. As Shohi passed the main gate of the rear palace, palace attendants surrounded and followed him as he walked down the cloisters. Once he arrived at the Palace of Northern Peaks, Shohi sent the palace attendants away, leaving only Rimi to accompany him into the palace.

Shohi entered the hall where the consorts were waiting, and the consorts stood up in an attempt to grovel before him in respect. But Shohi quickly raised his hand and told them to skip the formalities, ordering them to sit down again.

Rimi stationed herself by the wall, and Hakurei walked up to her.

“What is going on?” Hakurei whispered into Rimi’s ear with his usual sweet voice, tickling her earlobe.

“His Majesty is here to ask the consorts for a favor,” Rimi whispered back, enduring the sensation in her ear.

“A favor? From the consorts?” Hakurei gave Rimi a confused look, unable to guess what that favor might be.

The consorts sat back down at the table and looked at Shohi. The candlelight made shadows dance on his face, which looked as young and beautiful as ever. The dark shadow of his eyelashes flickered upon his cheek. However, the consorts did not seem enchanted with his beauty. They were waiting nervously for Shohi to speak.

Noble Consort So seemed more tense than usual, her mouth tightly closed. Virtuous Consort Ho was as quiet and calm as a warrior. Even the usually gentle and meek Worthy Consort On and the normally spirited Pure Consort Yo seemed unusually dignified.

Oh, I see... This is the sight of retainers waiting for their master to speak, Rimi thought. During the Declaration of Stability, the emperor had ordered them to be his retainers. They were straightening their postures to live up to the responsibility and pride that came with that.

“Forgive the sudden summons,” Shohi opened. He slowly looked at the consorts in turn. “There is something I wish for you to do.”

After a moment’s silence, the consorts exchanged glances. Their gazes fell on So, who nodded slightly.

“Whatever you command, Your Majesty,” So said.

“Soon, we will hold a feast to which the delegation from Saisakoku will be invited. At that feast, I would like for you to entertain the emissary, Prince Gulzari Shar. He is the brother of Saisakoku’s emperor.”

Hearing this, Yo mumbled hesitantly, “By ‘entertain,’ you don’t mean inviting him to our bedchambers to...”

“You fool, are you mad?!” Shohi quickly interrupted her, aghast. “I am not

requiring something so vulgar of you. I want you to show him that there are beautiful and refined women in Konkoku, that our culture is advanced and impressive, and that we possess a great appreciation for art. As the most cultured and beautiful women of Konkoku, there are none more suitable for the task.”

The reason for Gulzari Shar’s rude behavior was that he had no interest in trading with Konkoku. He must have assumed that whatever could be obtained here could also be secured through trade with other countries. Thus, there was nothing to gain from trading with Konkoku, which in turn caused his lack of interest in the country. Were Konkoku to aggressively approach him with talks about relations, trade, and spices, Shar would simply have become fed up and pretended to listen before quickly returning home.

But if they instead made him interested in Konkoku through other means, he might just become willing to at least take the country seriously. To do so, they first had to somehow direct his attention to Konkoku. As a people that had aggressively expanded their territory for a millennium, they were technologically advanced and had a much richer history of philosophy, science, and art than other countries. That was something to admire and become interested in that could not be found in Wakoku or Saisakoku.

Konkoku has an amazing culture and history. Rimi felt this particularly keenly, having come to Konkoku from another country. While she was still proud of the culture of her home country, there was no denying the effect a thousand-year-long history could have on the resulting technology, poetry, dancing, and architecture, as well as the expertise of those who practiced it.

“Please, consorts, will you accept this task?” Shohi asked, and Ho gave him a perfect smile.

“That is what we are best at, Your Majesty. Isn’t that right, ladies?” Ho said.

The other three consorts smiled in unison. Rimi’s heart started beating faster at the sight.

The consorts are sure to show him what the most beautiful and noble women of Konkoku are like.

Chapter 5: Feast Preparations

I

We need the right place, the right food, and the right entertainment.

During the next day's imperial council, Shohi announced that he would be holding a feast and inviting the Saisakokuan emissary Gulzari Shar. The Minister of Rites and Minister of Revenue, who had not been informed in advance, voiced their concerns. But Shu Kojin, the chancellor, only looked on in silence without objecting, which took the wind out of the ministers' sails.

Shusei had been left completely in charge of the feast's details. He needed to decide on a day, a place, and what would happen during the feast, get Shohi's approval, and then immediately start preparing. The Saisakokuan delegation had yet to reveal when they were planning to leave, but considering how free-spirited the emissary was, it would have been no surprise if they suddenly announced that they were leaving the very next day. Shusei needed to, at the very least, decide on a day before that happened to keep them here.

After the council, Shusei happened upon Shu Kojin in the cloisters of the Hall of New Harmony.

"Father?"

Since Shusei had not returned to the Shu mansion for some time, this was his first time meeting Kojin in a while. His father, however, spoke as dispassionately as ever, seemingly unconcerned about his son.

"I hear you have been charged with an important duty, Shusei. Give it your all," Kojin said.

"Yes, Father," Shusei replied when he realized something odd. "You didn't object to this feast, did you? Why not?"

"I simply thought it was the best course of action. It was good thinking on your part. You are living up to my expectations."

“It’s not just my idea but His Majesty’s as well. Not to mention, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu is the one who inspired us.”

“Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, you say...” For a short moment, Kojin’s lips seemed to twist into a piercing smirk.

“Is there something about her?”

“Nothing in particular yet. Still, Shusei, keep your distance from that Lady of Precious Bevy.”

“She’s only my assistant. I have no plans on becoming closer to her than that.”

“I hope you are right.”

“Are you implying something might happen if I did grow closer to her?”

This time, Kojin gave an unmistakable smile.

“Think about it yourself using that clever head of yours,” Kojin said before walking away.

Shusei observed his father’s back as it grew smaller when something that had bothered him ever since he was a child crossed his mind.

Sometimes it seems as if Father despises me. His parting utterance, along with the cold gaze in his eyes, had seemed like nothing short of contempt.

Even when Shusei was a child, Kojin had, if only on rare occasions, been frightfully coldhearted toward him—enough to make Shusei wonder if his father hated him. He felt as if Kojin was always holding something back that suddenly might explode one day.

But why did Father warn me not to get close to Rimi? Does he also know that she is Shohi’s favorite concubine? Is that why? Or is there something else?

Lost in thought, Shusei walked toward the cuisinology hall. He would be using it as his office while preparing for the feast. Being located by the Ministry of Rites made communication easy, and there were ample documents there for reference.

In any case, I don’t need any warnings. I already know that I can’t get close to

Rimi. She knows it too. The memory of that night when he had embraced Rimi and looked her close in the eye still burned vividly in his mind. Every time he thought back to it, he felt a sharp pain in his chest—but regardless of their feelings, some things were simply out of reach for the two of them.



Shu Kojin made a frustrated expression at his slight loss of control over his emotions. He had always prided himself on his flawless restraint and never being at a loss. Seeing Shusei's faint loss of composure, Kojin had felt like sneering—but perhaps he was not much better. Though not as obviously as Shusei, Kojin would also slightly lose his composure from time to time.

Memories surfaced in his mind that shook him from within.

He...

Kojin felt an emotion that was not quite hatred but also not quite love.



After showing Tama to Shohi during her normal morning visit, Rimi had gone to the cuisinology hall. Tama was curled around Rimi's neck like a warm, pleasant scarf. Rimi would spend her entire day in the cuisinology hall continuing Shusei's research until it was time for Shohi's supper.

Rimi picked up some notes from Shusei. The beautiful writing seemed to her as if it was Shusei's fingers, and she gently caressed it. This was all she could do to take her mind off her loneliness.

I'm a palace woman. I can't get close to Shusei.

With no one around to see her, she continued running her fingers across the writing. Tama looked down curiously at Rimi's hand with her big, blue eyes, as if to ask what she was doing.

"When I do this, it's like I'm touching Master Shusei's fingers, don't you think?" Rimi said, smiling softly.

Tama swiftly ran down Rimi's arm and gave the ink on the paper a whiff.

"Oh, I want to do that too," Rimi said.

She brought the paper closer to her face and smelled the ink. Tama climbed

back onto Rimi's shoulder and smelled it along with her. As unseemingly as it may have been, and even if it bordered on perversion, as long as she wasn't seen, Rimi didn't care.

It smells like ink...and also a bit of agarwood? Master Shusei's clothes always smell like agarwood.

As she sniffed the paper like a dog, she suddenly heard a puzzled voice behind her.

"What are you doing?"

Rimi turned around to find Shusei standing there, and she let out a scream and dropped the notes she was holding in surprise. Tama was also frightened as she jumped down from Rimi and hid underneath her skirt.

I-I-I got seen! I got seen acting like a pervert! And by Master Shusei himself of all people!

Rimi turned bright red as Shusei curiously picked up the notes from the floor.

"Does it smell bad? I don't think the ink I used was that bad," Shusei said.

"N-No, not at all! If anything, your writing just smelled so good that I couldn't help myself!"

"Huh...?"

They looked at each other and blushed at the same time, but they immediately caught themselves and diverted their gazes.

"No, this isn't right! We have to calm down, Rimi!" Shusei exclaimed.

"Y-Y-Yes, you're right! I know!"

Rimi was flustered, but she almost felt as though she could hear Shusei's racing heart too.

"U-Um... Why are you here in the cuisinology hall, Master Shusei?" Rimi asked. Ever since Shusei had been asked to devote himself to his role as grand councilor, he had barely any time to visit the cuisinology hall—thus, Rimi had been taken off guard.

Shusei walked up to the tea set, seemingly in an attempt to calm himself

down, and started preparing tea.

“I’m planning on using this hall as my office while I prepare for the feast,” Shusei explained. “I’ll be speaking to the Ministry of Rites a lot, so this is a convenient location. But if I were to get in the way of your work...”

“No, not at all! This hall belongs to you!”

“I’ve summoned Koshin here today, so we won’t be alone together. You don’t have to worry.”

Shusei somewhat awkwardly poured tea into a cup and, still awkwardly, handed it to Rimi when Koshin showed up. They both breathed sighs of relief as he entered the hall.

“I’m sorry for calling you here when you’re busy preparing breakfast, Koshin,” Shusei said.

“I’ve told En what to do and left him in charge, so it’s fine. What did you need from me in a place like this?” Koshin asked.

An archive like this appeared to be a new sight to Koshin, who looked around the hall with an impressed expression. Other than officials, most ordinary people would never get a chance to lay their eyes on an archive of this size.

Rimi started making tea for Koshin while he and Shusei sat down at a table.

“I called you here to discuss a feast that we will be holding for Gulzari Shar, the emissary from Saisakoku. The exact date is still up in the air, but it will take place no more than ten days from now. I would like you to handle the food for the feast,” Shusei said.

“Now that’s rather sudden, isn’t it? Well, it’s not like it’s the first time we’ve had a sudden feast thrust upon us, so we cooks are used to it. The real problem is the person we’re serving.” Koshin furrowed his brow, annoyed. “Don’t you remember what that Saisakokuan cook said? Apparently, Konkokuan food isn’t to his master’s liking.”

“Yes, that’s true. I heard it too. But for the purposes of this feast, I insist on asking you, the foremost cook of Konkokuan food, to make something that will draw Prince Shar’s attention. The goal of the feast is to make Prince Shar

interested in Konkokuan culture.”

Koshin crossed his arms, frowned, and started thinking.

Considering how Shuri talked, it's no wonder the Chief of Dining is hesitant... Shuri had said that Shar had eaten Konkokuan food in the past and that he would eat it if told to—but beyond that, he had no particular interest in Konkokuan cuisine.

“Just what am I supposed to cook for someone who doesn't care about Konkokuan food?” Koshin pondered.

Getting someone to gain an interest in something they didn't care about would require something that would draw their attention at first glance. As you would have to eat the food to see how it tasted, the most important aspects would be the aroma and the appearance. At the same time, regardless of how good it smelled or how gorgeous it looked, if it was still normal Konkokuan food, it would not make Shar interested—and even if it did, if it tasted the same as the Konkokuan food he had eaten already, he would only be disappointed.

They needed a Konkokuan dish that could attract the attention of someone uninterested in Konkokuan food.

Does something like that really exist?

Rimi put the tea on the table in front of Shusei and Koshin when the jade-colored kaorizuke, which she had put on a porcelain plate to go with the tea, caught her eye. She remembered that Shar had been interested in her kaorizuke, having said that he had never seen anything like it.

“How about a dish that he has never had before?” Rimi suggested.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Koshin said.

“We'll make something that Prince Shar thinks is unusual. Something that's neither Konkokuan nor Saisakokuan food...” The solution was on the tip of Rimi's tongue. The time she had turned the river crabs into a Saisakokuan dish came to mind.

“Do you mean Wakokuan food?” Shusei asked, but Rimi shook her head.

“No, Wakoku has nothing to do with what we're trying to do, so I don't think

that's something we should factor in. As you said, Master Shusei, there's no point if we can't make him interested in Konkoku."

Shuri had said that he had never seen river crabs before, but after giving them a taste, he had immediately suggested what spices would go well with them. As a result, the muddy taste of the crabs had disappeared, and the Konkokuan ingredients had turned into a Saisakokuan meal.

Do we use Konkokuan ingredients? Or should we send for Saisakokuan ingredients? But if we simply use Konkokuan or Saisakokuan ingredients, we will just end up with a Konkokuan or Saisakokuan dish. And even if we combined the ingredients...

What they needed was something that both was and wasn't Konkokuan food—but it couldn't be something entirely different, or the entire purpose of the meal would be lost.

It can't be normal Konkokuan food, and it can't be normal Saisakokuan food... Combining the ingredients...

Suddenly, a certain word caused Rimi to have a revelation.

Combining! Rimi saw a light. *Something that's neither Konkokuan nor Saisakokuan—in other words...*

"Something that's both Konkokuan and Saisakokuan at the same time!" Rimi exclaimed, and Shusei and Koshin shot her perplexed gazes. "That's right! We can just make an entirely new Konkokuan dish!"

"Well that's easy for you to say, but even if we think it's a new dish, what if the Saisakokuans just think it's a slightly different tasting Konkokuan dish?" Koshin said.

"That's why we blend it, so that doesn't happen!" Rimi said.

"Blend it?" Shusei repeated before realizing what Rimi meant. "You don't mean with Saisakokuan food, do you?"

Rimi nodded. It appeared Shusei was as perceptive as ever.

"We'll blend Konkokuan and Saisakokuan food to create a completely new taste. We just need one dish. As long as we can come up with something like

that, I am sure Prince Shar will find it strange and interesting,” Rimi explained.

“You can’t be serious... ‘Blend’ them...?” Koshin muttered, dumbfounded.

While the idea might have seemed absurd to a traditional Konkokuan cook, to Rimi this seemed like the only path forward.

Shusei turned to face Koshin.

“Yes... Yes, that’s right. We’ll blend them,” Shusei said eagerly. “That’s the only option we have. Koshin, I want you to come up with a new taste. You’re the finest cook in Konkoku and the head of the imperial cooks—the Chief of Dining himself. I know you can do it.”

II

“Are you a goddamn idiot?!” Koshin roared, causing Rimi to flinch.

Rimi had suggested combining Konkokuan and Saisakokuan food to create a completely new kind of dish. After being showered with praise from an enthusiastic Shusei, Koshin had then set off toward the kitchen. However, upon leaving the cuisinology hall, he had for some reason asked to take Rimi with him. Rimi had wondered why, but Koshin had insisted that it was important. So Rimi and Shusei had agreed, and she had followed Koshin to the kitchen.

But the moment they stepped inside, Koshin had started yelling at her.

“An idiot? Am I?” Rimi asked.

“Yes, that’s right! Let me give it to you straight—you’re an idiot! You’re a huge goddamn idiot! You just had to go and run your mouth and cause the cuisinologist to get funny ideas. You want me to blend Saisakokuan and Konkokuan cuisine? That’s impossible! I don’t even know the first thing about Saisakokuan food!”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. We have Shuri!” Rimi replied, unconcerned.

“You think a kid like that, who laughs at the very idea of Konkokuan food, would be happy to help us out?!”

Koshin's remark snapped Rimi out of her carefree mood. As Shuri had been happy to teach her Saisakokuan cooking, Rimi had assumed that he would be eager to help out—but once he learned that they were planning to combine his cooking with Konkokuan cooking, there was a very real chance that he would refuse.

“Oh... It might be impossible, actually,” Rimi said, and Koshin put both hands on the kitchen counter and hung his head.

“Yes, that's what I figured. Now what are we supposed to do, oh Lady of Precious Bevy?”

Shuri did not seem to Rimi like the kind of person who would turn down a request to teach them Saisakokuan cooking, but he would probably not be happy to learn that what he had taught had been used to make a Konkokuan dish—especially not one that was to be served to his beloved master Shar. Even so, Shuri's help was indispensable.

“In that case, how about having Shuri help us with the actual combining of the two cuisines? Shuri can speak Konkokuan, so we can work together,” Rimi suggested.

“That's even more impossible than your previous idea!”

“But we need his help... I'm going to see him and try to convince him.”

While Koshin had a short temper, Shuri was stubborn. Since Rimi was the one who suggested it, she had to take responsibility and mediate between them. She left the fretting Chief of Dining behind in the kitchen and returned to the rear palace where she wrapped some kaorizuke with paper. Shar had asked her to treat him to kaorizuke again sometime, so this was the perfect pretext to enter the Palace of Twin Dragons to speak to Shuri.

When Rimi arrived at the palace, she was greeted by a Saisakokuan military officer. She did her best to attempt to communicate using body language to no avail, and the officer gave her a kind but troubled look. He then gestured at her to wait for a moment while he entered the building. Before long, he came back together with Shuri. Given that he knew Konkokuan, Shuri must have served as an interpreter for more informal occasions.

“Rimi? What is it?” Shuri asked.

“I brought kaorizuke for Prince Shar. He asked me to bring him some again, remember?”

“Yes, he did. That’s fine. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you. Come in. You’ll have to wait for a bit, though.”

Rimi entered the reception hall she had visited the day before. All doors were open so that the garden could be viewed from inside, and it was terribly cold, but a brazier had been placed below the table to warm one’s legs.

Rimi looked out into the garden and was astounded at what she saw. Gulzari Shar was outside throwing snowballs together with the servant boys. As she watched on in amazement, Shuri joined her.

“Sit down and have some tea while you wait,” Shuri said.

She sat down as told and Shuri handed her a silver teacup.

“Is Prince Shar always like this?” Rimi asked.

“We don’t get snow in Saisakoku. Prince Shar is happy to see something so unusual,” Shuri replied. “It would have been easier to travel when it was warmer, but he came during winter because he wanted to see the snow.”

Shar must have been a playful man. The way he treated everyone equally must have been why so many people gathered around him, and why his servant boys were able to play with him so innocently.

Shar was absorbed in playing with the snow, and he did not look toward the hall. Shuri seemed slightly sad as he looked on.

“Aren’t you joining him, Shuri?” Rimi asked.

“Those children are his personal servants. My duty is to serve Prince Shar food to make him happy.”

“But you can speak Konkokuan, so you can serve as an interpreter too, can’t you? Where did you study Konkokuan?”

“I didn’t study it. I lived in Konkoku for a little while a long time ago, which is why I can speak it. I don’t find snow unusual. I hate it.”

“You lived in Konkoku? Why?”

“A merchant from Konkoku who had come to the southern countries to buy spices bought me. He said he liked the color of my skin.”

Konkokuan merchants were unable to deal with Saisakoku directly. But they could still trade with them indirectly by way of the Southern Trinity, which both Saisakokuans and Konkokuans frequented.

“My parents worked in the Southern Trinity. But their business didn’t go well, so they sold me along with the spices,” Shuri explained dispassionately. Rimi was stunned.

His parents sold him? Rimi had no way of knowing how old Shuri had been at the time but most slaves were sold as children. Rimi herself had been worried and lonely enough when she first came to Konkoku despite having come here with a place waiting for her. She shuddered to think what Shuri might have felt, and what he must have gone through in this foreign country. He must have experienced things Rimi couldn’t even imagine.

“Did you have a hard time in Konkoku?” Rimi asked hesitantly.

“I was not happy here. I hate the snow. It’s so cold, and I thought that I would die. So I ran back to the Southern Trinity where Prince Shar found me.” Shuri looked at the snow emotionlessly.

“I see. You’re terribly indebted to him. Is that why you’re serving him?”

“No, it’s not because I’m indebted. I just want Prince Shar to be happy. If I can make him happy, he won’t forget that I exist.”

Shuri looked at his master playing in the snow with a gaze that seemed to say, “I’m here.”

He must have been very lonely this whole time. Shuri had been sold all alone by his parents to another country only to run away again. Shar must have been the one and only person he could lean on. Shar had given him a place where he belonged.

When Rimi had first joined her Saigu sister’s temple and gained a place for herself, she had also been beyond herself with happiness at the fact that her

sister had actually noticed her. She had started wanting to make her happy, to make her sister look at her—it had been a sensation akin to starving. Her sharp sister had realized this and treated her with respect, which had gradually satiated her hunger, but Shuri was still far from full. In fact, he likely feared being forgotten even more as additional people joined his master's side.

After a particularly loud laugh from Shar, he fell over, sending white snow into the air. He then let out another pleased laugh for a while, after which he slowly got back onto his feet. As he did, he appeared to notice Rimi, and he uttered what seemed to be an expression of surprise in Saisakokuan before brushing the snow off his clothes and entering the hall.

"If it isn't Rimi, the princess from Wakoku. Welcome. Did you come for tea?" Shar asked, sitting down in a chair with an innocent smile as his silver earrings glittered in the light. Without a moment's delay, one of the servant boys handed him a wool blanket to warm him up.

"I am here to share some more kaorizuke as you requested," Rimi said.

"Oh!"

Rimi opened the paper package she had brought with her, and Shar quickly took a piece of the kaorizuke and put it in his mouth. As she observed him, Rimi realized something odd.

"Prince Shar, I see you remembered my name," Rimi said.

"You're a princess from Wakoku who gave me unusual Wakokuan food. Of course I remember your name," Shar replied before turning to Shuri. "Let's put this in a bowl. Rushi, could you bring a bowl?"

"It's Shuri," Shuri corrected him with a somewhat annoyed look.

"Oh, did I get it wrong again? I'm sorry about that, Shuri. Now, the bowl."

Shar smiled without a hint of guilt on his face, and Shuri appeared to give up as he let out a small sigh.

"I will be right back," Shuri said and left the room.

Seeing Shuri walk away dejectedly, Shar finally realized that something was wrong. He seemed to ask the boys nearby in Saisakokuan whether he was

angry. The boys exchanged hesitant glances.

“Do you often get Shuri’s name wrong?” Rimi asked.

“I have boys named Shuri, Rushi, and Shori, you see. I get them mixed up,” Shar said with an awkward expression. “They all do excellent work. They’re great kids.”

“They’re all great kids”... Although it was a compliment, it was likely far from what Shuri wanted to hear. Above all, Shuri feared becoming just one among many and being forgotten by Shar. If only he would at least remember Shuri’s name...

For all his virtues, Shar seemed to be lacking in the delicacy department.

His name...? Rimi was lost in thought when Shuri came back carrying a tea set. Shar thanked him using the correct name this time, but Shuri still seemed to be in a sour mood. That’s right! Prince Shar remembered my name! In that case...

Rimi had a sudden realization, one that was perfectly aligned with her current goal. She was so excited that she instinctively stood up from her chair.

“Prince Shar! I have a favor to ask!” she exclaimed. “Could you let me borrow Shuri? If possible, I would like for him to spend a few days with me, the court cook Yo Koshin, and the grand councilor Shu Shusei.”

“That’s awfully sudden. What are you planning?” Shar wondered.

“Something incredibly fun! May I have your permission?”

Shuri looked on dubiously as Rimi spoke with bright eyes, but Shar was as good-natured as ever, calmly listening to Rimi with great interest.

“This is not something that will be distressing for Shuri, is it?” Shar asked.

“Not at all. It’s something very fun. I’m certain you will enjoy it too, Prince Shar.”

“What do you think, Shuri?”

“I will do as you command, Prince Shar,” Shuri responded.

Shar crossed his arms and looked at Rimi, and after a moment’s silence, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “You can assure me that Shuri won’t come to harm, yes?”

“I swear.”

“Then you have my permission.”

Rimi was so excited that she almost started jumping on the spot while she gave Shar her thanks, before turning to Shuri.

“Come, Shuri. Let’s go to the kitchen,” Rimi said.

“Why? What are we going to do, Rimi?”

“I’ll explain on the way there. Let’s go!”

Rimi kept herself from running as she left the Palace of Twin Dragons with Shuri following after her. The afternoon sun illuminated the snow that covered the imperial palace, making it seem even brighter than usual. Occasionally you could hear the sound of snow falling from the arched eaves of the roofs.

As they entered a roofed passageway, Shuri walked up next to Rimi.

“What is happening? Am I going to do something?” Shuri asked in a worried tone, and Rimi smiled at him.

“His Majesty is planning a feast to entertain Prince Shar. I want you to make the food for that feast together with the Chief of Dining. We’re creating a new dish by combining Konkokuan and Saisakokuan cooking, which we’ll serve to Prince Shar. We have to ensure he’s satisfied with the food.”

“‘Combining’?!” Shuri exclaimed with clear disgust in his voice, and he stopped in his tracks. “I refuse. I’m not serving Prince Shar something strange like that. I don’t want him to think that’s my cooking.”

“Then we just have to make sure it’s not strange, right? We’ll make something delicious and unusual, something he’s never seen before.”

“What’s the point of doing that? Normal, tasty Saisakokuan food is enough for me.”

“But then you’ll be quickly forgotten. Prince Shar will even forget the name of the person who made his meals one day.”

Shuri's face tensed. Rimi must have touched a sore spot.

"I think you're wonderful for making Prince Shar delicious food that you know he likes every day," Rimi continued. "But you're not necessarily the only one who can make delicious food."

"Of course. Anyone can make delicious food."

"Exactly. In other words, it doesn't have to be you who makes food for Prince Shar. If anyone could do it, you'll make a weak impression on him. As more people join him, he'll get your name wrong more often. One day he might even forget your name entirely."

Rimi was well aware that she was being harsh toward Shuri.

"But if you make something special, something only you can make, you'll leave an impression," Rimi said. "Even if you have to leave Prince Shar's side one day, as long as your food was remarkable enough, he'll always remember that he once had a cook by the name of Shuri. If you don't want him to get your name wrong, then don't you think it's worth trying something besides making his favorite food?"

Shusei, Rimi, and Koshin were all eager to combine Konkokuan and Saisakokuan cuisine in order to make something new that will leave an impression, and Rimi had come here because Shuri's help would be vital to achieving that goal. However, it might just be that Shuri himself needed the very same thing, and that thought had spurred her into action. She felt certain that she was right.

"Prince Shar remembered my name even though we had only met once. As I wondered why that could be, I remembered that he had found my kaorizuke interesting. I brought him something unusual, and that was why he remembered me so easily," Rimi explained.

Shuri looked at Rimi and fell silent. He seemed unsure how to respond.

"As good as something might taste, if it's nothing out of the ordinary, then it won't leave an impression, and Prince Shar will quickly forget about it. If you instead serve him something new but still delicious, it will remain as a vivid memory in his mind," Rimi continued, pushing Shuri further as he tried to

decide what to do.

The silence continued for many moments. Rimi waited patiently until Shuri finally raised his head, his mind made up.

“All right. I’ll do it.”

III

The four consorts had gathered in the Palace of Northern Peaks, which was otherwise reserved for the empress, with permission from the Department of Service. Dazzling silk, gauze, and velvet were spread out all over the main hall of the palace. Dressmakers—palace women and eunuchs from the Wardrobe Service—as well as servant women were running about. Everyone was working hard to prepare the consorts’ outfits for the feast to which Saisakoku’s emissary, Gulzari Shar, would be invited.

Time was short as Shohi had expressed wanting to hold the feast as soon as possible. Thus, instead of conducting the measurements and fabric selections in the consorts’ respective palaces, as would be the usual procedure, the consorts had all been gathered in one place.

“It’s a sea of silk and gauze...” Pure Consort Yo groaned, surrounded by vibrant textiles.

“Pure Consort Yo, focus, will you? His Majesty has bestowed a crucial role upon us. We can’t afford to neglect our attire,” Noble Consort So chided Yo while a palace woman took her measurements.

“Fiiine,” Yo responded, shrugging her shoulders.

Worthy Consort On was sitting next to Yo, happily selecting the fabric for her outfit.

“Yes, this really is proof that His Majesty has acknowledged us as his retainers, isn’t it?” Worthy Consort On said as she happily selected the fabric for her outfit next to Yo. “I’m still amazed that he made such a marvelous decision at the Declaration of Stability, and at how he spoke almost as if he had heard about our circumstances from our own mouths.”

Having finished her measurements and fabric selection first, Virtuous Consort Ho was sitting at a table off to the side. Leisurely sipping tea with her legs crossed, she nodded in agreement with On.

“I was also wondering why that was,” she said. “The strangest part of it all was how he seemed to know everything about us. If he didn’t, I can’t imagine he would have done something like that.”

“Why, isn’t that due to the blessing of the divine dragon?” Yo said.

“Well, I suppose you could call it the divine dragon’s blessing,” Ho said, sighing at how innocent Yo was. “After all, a certain someone must have planned for His Majesty to hear our voices. Perhaps it was the blessing of the divine dragon that ensured His Majesty had that person by his side.”

“‘Hear our voices’?” So repeated with a surprised expression as she sat down at the table, her measurements done. Ho gave her a cup of tea while nodding in response.

“Do you remember the sword dance that took place on the stage during the supper in the garden of the Palace of Northern Peaks? There was another dancer there besides Hakurei, and now that I think about it, that had to have been His Majesty. That would explain why the cuisinologist was playing his zither so quietly—it was to ensure that His Majesty could hear our voices from the stage.”

“Now that you mention it...” On said, covering her mouth in surprise.

Yo and On both made their way from the sea of fabric to the table.

“His Majesty is someone who threatened to cut my tongue off when we first met. I can’t imagine someone so callous would go out of his way to listen to our voices for no reason,” So said pensively. “There must have been someone who advised His Majesty that he should listen to us before making a decision and planned that supper to enable him to do just that.”

“The cuisinologist, perhaps? He does advise His Majesty,” Yo suggested, but On shook her head.

“The person who advised His Majesty must have been someone who was upset with how he was treating us,” On said. “The cuisinologist is wise, but he is

not close enough to us to worry about our treatment. Besides, the arrangement of that supper was very delicate and feminine.”

“Then could it have been Hakurei?” Yo asked. Ho shook her head.

“Hakurei may not look like it, but he is not kind enough to worry about our feelings, and his tastes are not feminine. He thinks like a man,” Ho said.

“It must have been Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. There’s no other explanation. She was the one in control during that supper, remember?” So quietly concluded. Ho and On both nodded in agreement.

“My dearest?” Yo said, astonished.

“Yes,” So said. “It was Lady Setsu. I’m sure of it.”

Suddenly, the palace women and eunuchs grew restless. The consorts followed their gazes to find the emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, standing there. Surprised, the consorts hurriedly kneeled on the floor.

“There is no need for formalities,” Shohi said as he approached the table. “Raise your heads. Sit down and relax. Have you been well?”

Shohi sat down in a chair himself, and the consorts hesitantly followed his example. Shohi leaned forward over the table.

“Are the preparations for the feast coming along?” Shohi asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty, everything is proceeding smoothly, as you can see. We are discussing not only our dress but also the best way to entertain our guest,” So said fearlessly as she gazed toward the sea of fabric behind her. Shohi gave a satisfied nod.

“I see everything is coming along well despite how sudden this all is. I am impressed. While you are preparing for the feast, Shusei is also busy planning. I realized that I cannot be the only one doing nothing. That is why I am here,” Shohi explained.

The consorts gave Shohi puzzled looks, unable to understand what he was trying to say. Shohi looked at the consorts one after the other.

“I have something to ask of you,” Shohi continued. “As noble women, you have grown up learning how to please others, have you not? I want you to

teach me what you know. I must know how I should behave during the feast to please and establish a bond with someone. That is my job.”

The consorts exchanged astonished glances.

“I can’t believe it...” Yo said without thinking, and So gave her a swift kick under the table.

There was no one higher ranking than the emperor. He knelt to no one, and he was in a position that required no restraint or consideration of others. The only education he received in regards to behavior was how to demonstrate his dignity. Now, that same emperor was asking to learn the best way to establish a bond with someone. Instead of commanding someone to open up their heart, he was trying to find a way to get them to do so willingly, in the truest sense of the words.

Common sense dictated that all the emperor had to do was command someone to open up and they would. That was what being the emperor meant. Even though everyone sensed how twisted this was, no one could speak up against it. Perhaps this twisted nature was the very thing that gave the emperor his dignity. Yet this young emperor was willing to sacrifice his dignity for a way to establish a true connection with someone.

The consorts smiled at him.



“The first step is to understand the other person, Your Majesty,” Ho explained.

“But I think you already understand this well, Your Majesty,” On said gently. “However, if you would like something more concrete, I have a suggestion.”

On explained what she had in mind, and the other consorts agreed wholeheartedly.



“The most common type of food in Saisakoku involves a lot of spices. We also eat kneaded and baked wheat as well as rice. We have dressed vegetables and meat cooked in fragrant sauces. Even just considering what we usually eat, there’s a lot to choose from. Saisakokuan food is the best food in the world,” Shuri explained matter-of-factly as he removed the lid from the box of spices he had placed on the kitchen counter. “I have no idea what will happen if you combine it with Konkokuan food. But you’re doing it anyway, aren’t you? I’ll help you.”

Koshin crossed his arms and sent the displeased cook a curious glance before turning to Rimi.

“Just how did you manage to convince this kid? He seems incredibly annoyed, but it almost sounds like he’s saying he’s willing to help us out,” Koshin said.

After Shuri had agreed to assist them with combining Saisakokuan and Konkokuan food, Rimi had immediately brought him to the kitchen. Upon their arrival, however, Koshin seemed puzzled, while Shuri himself appeared unsure if he really was willing to help—he seemed upset or even a bit angry.

Trapped between two volatile people, Rimi almost started sweating nervously.

“He’s definitely motivated! Aren’t you, Shuri?” Rimi said with a forced smile.

“I am. At least halfway,” Shuri said dispassionately.

“Halfway?!” Koshin exclaimed.

“Well, half of it is Konkokuan cooking. You’ll have to take care of the other half of the motivation.”

“This goddamn kid...”

“U-Um... Let’s start by discussing what ingredients to use and how to combine them!” Rimi said, trying to change the subject and defuse the situation. “How about combining two dishes that both prominently demonstrate the differences between the two countries’ cuisine?”

Koshin glared at Shuri before nodding toward his box of spices.

“If we’re talking differences, that’s gotta be the biggest one. You mixed those to make that kari thing, didn’t you? You cooked beans, while Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu cooked crabs. I’d never smelled anything like it,” Koshin said.

Shuri shrugged as he placed one pot after another on the counter.

“There’s actually no dish called ‘kari.’ I just call it that to make it easier for people outside Saisakoku to understand. The word ‘kari’ doesn’t even come from Saisakoku. It was invented by people from the Southern Trinity,” Shuri explained.

“What do you mean? Isn’t that stew you made kari?” Rimi asked with a puzzled look.

“There are countless dishes that you make by mixing spices and cooking ingredients with them. You can eat it alone or with a larger meal. You can mix it with something, pour it on something, or add it to something. But to people from outside Saisakoku, it all apparently looks the same. That’s why they call all stews that use spices like that kari. So I use that word to make it easier to explain.”

Rimi had heard that Saisakokuan food was generally eaten with your hands. They had their own manners and traditions of eating that differed from both Wakoku and Konkoku. Even just explaining a single dish was hard.

Koshin sighed.

“I guess there’s no way around it. We’ll just have to go through it all in succession. Hey, kid. What staple food do you have in Saisakoku?” Koshin asked.

“Rice, baked and deep-fried foods made from wheat dough, thin noodles

made from rice flour...something like that.” Shuri looked Koshin straight in the eye for the first time as he spoke.

“We’ve got rice and wheat noodles,” Koshin said.

“I know. I ate rice when I was in Konkoku a long time ago.”

“You were in Konkoku? Why’s that? You’re a Saisakokuan, aren’t you?”

“A merchant bought me,” Shuri replied.

Koshin fell silent for a moment hearing Shuri’s blunt statement, but after a short while, he continued hesitantly.

“Well, that’s... Just what happened to you...?” Koshin asked.

“I was sold and bought. That’s it.”

Shuri stared at Koshin, seemingly not wanting to touch the subject further. Rimi hurriedly joined the conversation.

“Oh, and as far as staple foods go, there are also those where you wrap ingredients with sheets made from wheat! There are many different types, and they’re delicious. You can deep-fry them, steam them, bake them, or simmer them.”

“That’s not a staple. That’s a type of baozi,” Koshin said, furrowing his brow.

“What? It’s not?” Rimi said, surprised. Shuri also shot her an astonished gaze.

“We have something similar in Saisakoku. We wrap thin sheets of wheat around things and deep-fry them. It’s a type of snack,” Shuri said.

“I just thought...with how fluffy and white like rice they are...” Rimi said, blushing at her mistake.

Shuri raised an eyebrow curiously.

“Fluffy wheat sheets? How come?” he asked.

“You knead them and steam them, and they naturally become soft and fluffy like clouds. That’s why I thought it was a staple food. You used to live in Konkoku, didn’t you? Did you never see anything like that?” Rimi asked.

“No, I didn’t. I only got to eat what they gave me.” For the first time, Shuri

was showing a strong interest in Konkokuan food.

“We’ve got that Saisakokuan baozi you mentioned in Konkoku too,” Koshin said. “But we’ve also got a slightly different kind, the one Lady Setsu mentioned. Do you want to see them, kid?”

Shuri didn’t seem to take kindly to being called “kid,” but after a moment of silence, he made up his mind.

“I do,” he said somewhat reluctantly. Despite how hesitant he was, this made Rimi smile.

Shuri really is a cook. Having lived in Konkoku, Shuri may have had some pride in knowing Konkokuan cuisine, but there were still things unfamiliar to him. As a cook who truly loved cooking and possessed an inquisitive mind, learning that something he thought he knew actually had even more to it made him curious.

“I’ll show you. But in return, you’ll have to show me how to mix those spices,” Koshin demanded, and Shuri nodded. “In Konkoku, food where you stuff sheets made from wheat with filling is called baozi. There are all kinds of fillings you can use. You can make the sheets with just wheat, salt, and water, or you can add yeast and let them ferment. You can boil them, bake them, deep-fry them, and steam them. From what I’ve heard so far, it sounds like you’ve also got food where you stuff wheat sheets with filling and deep-fry or bake them in Saisakoku, but fermenting and steaming should be new to you.”

Koshin took some wheat from a shelf and poured it into a large bowl. He then took a small pot from another shelf that contained a sweet and sour-smelling substance that looked like simmered fruit.

“That’s the yeast, isn’t it?” Rimi said.

Rimi had seen something similar in Wakoku. Given the sweet and sour smell, it must have been yeast made from fruit.

“That’s right. We’ll mix this with the dough, warm it a bit, and then let it sit. That’ll make it expand,” Koshin said.

Koshin added the yeast, water, and salt to the wheat in the bowl. He then started kneading it, and in the blink of an eye, the mixture had turned into a dough. Next, he brought a pot that had been sitting on a stove. He put the bowl

with the dough inside, then covered the bowl with another one.

“This will make it expand. If you put ingredients inside and steam it, it’s daozi. Without any filling, it’s mantou. I’ll show you once the dough has risen, so teach me about your spices in the meantime,” Koshin said.

Shuri stepped around the counter to where the spices had been placed and swiftly picked twelve pots.

“These are the twelve most fundamental spices. You can decrease these or add something else to go with the ingredients or the cooking method you’re using.” Shuri touched eight of the pots in turn. “These eight add aroma to the dish. They’re cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, clove, bay leaves, allspice, coriander, and garlic.”

Most of the spices existed in Konkoku too, and Rimi recognized their names. However, she had never heard of three of them: cardamom, allspice, and coriander.

Shuri touched the remaining four pots.

“This is turmeric, which adds color to the food. The other three make the food spicier—chili pepper, ginger, and black pepper.”

The last four spices were frequently used in Konkokuan cuisine as well, though black pepper was not cultivated in Konkoku. Instead, it was imported entirely from Saisakoku via the Southern Trinity.

“You grind the spices into a fine powder, mix them, and dry roast them to bring out the aroma. But it’s not enough to just add these to make the food taste good. You have to add depth to the flavor while cooking,” Shuri explained.

“Now that you mention it, you fried vegetables into mush,” Rimi said, thinking back to when she learned Saisakokuan cooking from Shuri.

“Yes. Aroma and pungency aren’t enough; you have to add sweetness for depth.”

“That’s true with anything,” Koshin nodded. “When making tang, you have to add a bit of ganjiang, or the taste will become dull no matter how much salt you pour in.”

Rimi was growing increasingly excited hearing the two of them talk.

This is so fascinating!

She unconsciously started smiling, and Koshin shot her a questioning gaze.

“What’re you smirking over there for?” he said.

“I was just thinking how, even though the cuisine of each country is different, we all taste the same thing. Adding sweetness to enhance saltiness is such a fundamental technique, but it’s fascinating how it’s used in every country like this,” Rimi said.

Both Shuri and Koshin’s eyes widened.

“If the fundamentals are the same, then it must be possible to make a single dish using both Konkokuan and Saisakokuan techniques, don’t you think?” Rimi continued.

“Then...you should make it, Rimi,” Shuri said.

“What?” Rimi said, confused.

“If I make this dish, it will become too similar to Saisakokuan food, and if the Chief of Dining makes it, it will be too much like Konkokuan food. We’re too used to the methods from our own countries,” Shuri explained.

“Yes, that’s true. You might be right about that, kid,” Koshin said. “You’re a Wakokuan, Lady of Precious Bevy, and you’re not used to Konkokuan or Saisakokuan cooking. So wouldn’t you be able to make fair use of both countries’ techniques?”

“But I’m no expert in either form of cooking...” Rimi said, bewildered at the sudden suggestion.

“That’s exactly what we need!” Koshin said, dismissing Rimi’s objections.

“I’ll teach you what you need to know about Saisakokuan cooking in steps and explain any techniques you might need to know when they’re relevant,” Shuri said.

“And you can count on me for Konkokuan cooking,” Koshin chimed in.

Rimi thought it was a preposterous suggestion. She even wondered if the two

of them might not just be trying to shove the responsibility onto her, afraid of making something unspeakable. But they both looked at her with earnest gazes.

Besides, they did have a point. They were both experts at their own forms of cooking. But that, in turn, meant that if they fixated on their own methods too much, the dish might end up too similar to standard Konkokuan or Saisakokuan cooking, which would likely fail to spark Shar's interest. All their work would have been for naught.

Master Shusei is in charge of this feast. He is giving it his all for the sake of His Majesty. In that case, I also...

Rimi was a Wakokuan, and if she attempted to combine two unfamiliar types of cooking, she might end up steering it too close to Wakokuan cooking. But by using Wakokuan techniques to mediate between Konkoku and Saisakoku, she might just be able to harmonize the two tastes.

Not to mention...it just sounds like so much fun! Rimi's heart started racing as she thought about how the dish might turn out.

"Very well. I'll do it," she responded, propelled by the excitement of the unknown.

Chapter 6: In Search of a New World

I

I can't think of any better place than this, Shusei thought as he observed the majestic imperial palace below and the pale blue-colored mountain range located to the west.

Shusei was standing on the second story of the lookout tower by the Palace of Twin Dragons. To the north was the beautifully snow-covered tiled roof of the Hall of Ultimate Supremacy. He also had a good view of the western mountains through which the road to Saisakoku ran. The sun seemed even more dazzling from here than on the ground. The vast scenery inspired one's heart to open up just as wide.

The second story of the tower was supported by four vermillion pillars. The colorful guard rail featured dragon, phoenix, and giraffe carvings. The black stone floor was finely polished, giving the space a regal air. A round lacquered ebony table for eight stood at the center. Two small dividers were placed in front of the stairs. Although not spacious, it was also not cramped. The small size of the space was actually exactly what they needed—the physical proximity would foster intimacy.

This tower was also located on the grounds of the Palace of Twin Dragons. If they were to summon Gulzari Shar somewhere other than where he was staying, he was certain to be wary. But if they instead invited Shar for a modest lunch in the lookout of his own palace, he would be more relaxed.

Just as Shusei had hoped, when Shohi sent a letter a few days later inviting Shar to have lunch with him and the four consorts, the emissary agreed.

The lookout was too small for a group of officials to join them, meaning that it would just be Shohi and the consorts—in other words, it was an unofficial gathering. Shar was likely confident that there would be no bothersome discussions. Despite this being another sign of how he was belittling Shohi, it

was just what they needed.

“I suppose this is all I can do,” Shusei said as the wind caressed his cheeks.

Soon, Gulzari Shar, Shohi, and the four consorts would arrive here. Everything would depend on how Shohi and the consorts behaved toward Shar.

Shusei had been told how the consorts were planning to entertain Shar. He worried that what they were planning might be too advanced for someone unaccustomed to Konkokuan culture to appreciate—but it was a very sophisticated choice for a feast.

We need the most refined entertainment possible. Something unsophisticated could be seen as an act of disrespect. Shusei wanted to believe that the consorts had made the right choice.

Meanwhile, Shusei had left the question of the food to serve entirely up to Koshin, Shuri, and Rimi. The only advice he had given them was to consider what the consorts were planning when deciding what to serve.

The question is what Prince Shar will think of the food. It needs to be something novel and fascinating enough not to bore him. If the food and entertainment don't go well together, they won't be as appealing to him. A common theme is key to ensuring that there will be a perfect feast. Shusei was in charge of the overall management of the feast, but it was the cooks' job to understand his wishes and incorporate them into the food.

During the preparations, Shusei had stopped by the kitchen a number of times to find Rimi standing between Koshin and Shuri, busy doing something. Upon his asking what they were doing, Rimi had explained that they were attempting to combine Konkokuan and Saisakokuan cuisine. Koshin had been teaching her Konkokuan cooking, while Shuri had been in charge of teaching her Saisakokuan cooking. Rimi had attempted to combine the two through trial and error. She had been very enthusiastic.

Shohi's letter of invitation had claimed that the food would be prepared by Yo Koshin, the Chief of Dining, and Shuri, the Saisakokuan delegation's cook. In truth, however, Rimi was responsible for mediating between the two. But as a mere palace woman, it would have been strange for her to be mentioned. The fact that she could work so eagerly in spite of this impressed Shusei. The

question of whether she would be credited for her work appeared to not even cross her mind—she was only doing it because she enjoyed it.

As long as she's having fun, that's a weight off my shoulders.

Since they had started preparing for the feast, Shusei and Rimi had learned to act like nothing had happened when in each other's presence. Their new duty had allowed them to distract themselves from the pain and confusion that came with their feelings for each other. Right now, they had to ensure that Shohi's feast succeeded. Feeling that they were working toward the same goal had also helped them to keep their composure.

A gong rang out by the gate to the Palace of Twin Dragons, signaling Shohi's arrival. Shusei looked down from the tower and found Shohi walking under a large parasol made from black silk. Four silk parasols followed him, each decorated with beautiful embroidery—they belonged to the four consorts. Though it was an informal gathering, the emperor still placed great importance on appearances.

As the parasols drew nearer, Shusei descended from the lookout and kneeled in front of the reception hall. Shohi stepped out from under the parasol and entered the gate.

"Everything is ready, Your Majesty," Shusei announced as he groveled on the ground before Shohi.

"I commend your efforts," Shohi replied and entered the reception hall. He had already been informed of the program.

The consorts followed Shohi, and Shusei was struck by their outfits. They were each wearing an attire in a different color—Noble Consort So's was light pink, Pure Consort Yo's a vivid green, Virtuous Consort Ho's a solemn yellow, and Worthy Consort On's a slightly bluish-white. However, the flowers, plants, and snowflakes embroidered onto their shawls and ruquns depicted the four seasons—although the extravagant outfits looked completely different at first glance, on closer inspection they all had a common theme. The subtlety made it all the more tasteful.

The outfits highlight their individuality while secretly being part of a larger whole. It's a representation of the consorts themselves. It was proof that they

respected one another and that they were united.

In the reception hall, Shohi and the consorts were greeted by Gulzari Shar with a Saisakokuan bow.

“I would like to invite Prince Gulzari Shar to a midday meal. Would you care to join me in the lookout tower?” Shohi asked. This invitation was a standard one used in circumstances such as this.

Shar smiled and said something in Saisakokuan that seemed to amount to “I accept the invitation.” Shohi nodded and took the lead.

The feast is starting. The food must be just about ready. Did Rimi enter the Palace of Twin Dragons already?

The feast would start with some light drinks as the food was gradually brought in. Given that it was an unofficial meal, overly extravagant food was to be avoided—but some form of food needed to be present on the table as cushioning to lighten the mood.

Shusei had been informed by Koshin what kind of food would be served. First, a Konkokuan dish would be prepared by Koshin. Next, a Saisakokuan dish would be cooked by Shuri. Finally, they would serve the dish that Rimi had come up with, combining both Koshin and Shuri’s knowledge. The third dish was the most important, but there was no telling what kind of effect it might have.

As he led Shohi, Shar, and the consorts to the lookout, Shusei was becoming increasingly nervous with each step that he took.



“His Majesty, the four consorts, and Prince Shar have entered the lookout!” a servant boy announced as he rushed in.

Rimi and Koshin looked up toward the source of the voice.

“Hey, is the second dish ready yet?” Koshin said to Shuri who was standing behind him. Shuri nodded.

“I’m also done with the third dish!” Rimi announced at the same time.

“Great, carry it to the Palace of Twin Dragons!” Koshin ordered the servants.

The servants picked up the bowls and plates and started carrying them away.

They also carried a few braziers along to ensure that the food would stay warm while it waited in the Palace of Twin Dragons to be brought to the tower. Rimi, Koshin, and Shuri were all very particular about keeping the warm food warm and the cold food cold.

Rimi entered the Palace of Twin Dragons together with Koshin and Shuri. She stared up at the lookout from the corner of the eaves, catching a glimpse of Shohi, Shar, and the consorts conversing cheerfully at the table.

“We need drinks right away,” Rimi hurriedly proclaimed.

“You go and have a look at how everything’s coming along. Signal to us whenever you need the next dish,” Koshin said, nodding in the direction of the lookout.

“Understood.”

Shohi and Shar were both present at the table, and in Konkoku, the only people allowed to wait on someone of such a high status were palace attendants, aides, and palace women with a rank. Neither Koshin nor Shuri was allowed in Shohi’s presence, but someone needed to carefully analyze the situation to ensure that the right food was brought in at the right time. Rimi was the only one who could do that.

Hakurei was standing below the tower, preparing to wait on the party above. He had apparently been invited here because he was Shohi’s personal attendant and had waited on the consorts in the past.

“You should hurry, Rimi. His Majesty is probably already sitting at the table. Whenever you need the next dish, just give me a signal. I’ll give them the word and carry it out,” Hakurei said.

“Thank you, Master Hakurei,” Rimi replied. Having Hakurei at her side to help her was reassuring.

Rimi ran up the winding staircase before stopping outside the entrance to the second floor. She regained her breath and closed her eyes in the darkness.

The feast is starting. We are serving the food that the Chief of Dining, Shuri, and I made.

There was no telling how the novel food would be received. Rimi hoped that it would at the very least leave an impression. Suddenly, she remembered the familiar voice of her Saigu sister. She would always say that expecting something from someone was a wicked desire. Rimi had to rid herself of such desires. She could be neither too enthusiastic nor so indifferent that she came across as disrespectful. Rimi needed to stay gentle as she focused on the task at hand.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya. Rimi heard the Saigu's voice.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am, Rimi responded in her head.

She straightened her back and opened her eyes. A light, pleasant feeling of tension ran through her body as she steeled herself. She stepped out onto the second story where Shusei was waiting. He turned around to face her.

"Master Shusei, we will begin the feast by serving drinks," Rimi said.



Rimi? I didn't expect to see her here.

Rimi had appeared at just the right time. Her eyes were unwavering and calm, most unlike her usual absentminded self.

This...is an immortal serving Holy Communion.

Something must have awoken inside of her on her way here. Sensing the air of an immortal emanating from her, Shusei's worry turned to excitement.

"Please do," Shusei said. "This is your Holy Communion, and I trust you to decide what to do. Serve what you think is right when you think the time is right."

"Very well," Rimi said with a dignified voice, and Shusei nodded.



While Rimi gave Shohi, Shar, and the four consorts a bow, Hakurei and some aides appeared carrying drinks. On the trays they were holding were long-stemmed silver cups of Saisakokuan design. Shar's expression softened as if reminiscing fondly.

Once all the cups had been placed on the table, Rimi appeared from behind the divider.

"These cups contain fragrant red wine—Konkokuan wine with cinnamon from Saisakoku added for fragrance," Rimi explained as she bowed. Shusei immediately translated to Saisakokuan.

"To the prosperity of both countries," Shohi said as picked up a cup, and Shar smiled cheerfully. Everyone at the table picked up their cups and took a sip of the wine. "Prince Shar, I invited you today in hopes of having a pleasant conversation with you. You can relax. I want you to enjoy the feast. With no flowers in winter, I instead invited the four consorts of the rear palace to provide some needed color. Do be friendly to them. From the right they are Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, Virtuous Consort Ho, and Worthy Consort On."

Shusei translated what Shohi said, and Shar cheerfully said something in Saisakokuan before turning to the consorts with a smile.

"Prince Shar says that he greatly appreciates the thoughtfulness and that he is happy to have a chance to lay his eyes on such tremendous beauty," Shusei explained

The consorts smiled back at Shar and introduced themselves in turn.

"I am So Reiki."

"My name is Yo Enrin."

"Ho Hekishu, at your service."

"I'm On Meiho."

Rimi looked behind her at Hakurei.

“Please bring in the first dish immediately,” she whispered.

Hakurei nodded and started descending the stairs. Soon, he came back together alongside the aides carrying trays with small plates.

“Please enjoy this first dish together with the wine. It’s a Konkokuan appetizer called siji cai,” Rimi said.

Four different bite-sized appetizers were arranged on long, narrow porcelain plates. The first was a meatball covered with lightly crimson-colored rice. The next was a paste made from river fish wrapped in vivid, boiled leaf vegetables. The third was shrimp balls that had been sprinkled with yellow-colored millet and deep-fried. The final appetizer was sweet potato paste wrapped in white sheets made from wheat. Each appetizer was inspired by one of the four seasons of Konkoku—hence the name siji cai or “four season dish.”

As she walked back to the wall, Rimi glanced at the consorts, and her eyes met So’s. The Noble Consort gave Rimi a confident smile.

Master Shusei said that the food and the entertainment needed to have a common theme. With this to guide them, Koshin, Shuri, and Rimi had come up with a three-course meal. This first meal was intended to go with what the consorts had planned. The theme of the consorts’ entertainment is the four seasons as well as the prosperity of both Konkoku and Saisakoku.

The attire that the consorts were wearing represented the four seasons. To someone from Saisakoku, which only had a dry and a wet season, the seasons of Konkoku must have been fascinating. The consorts were trying to put that fascination to good use.

Shar compared the plate with the consorts’ attire and said what apparently meant, “The appetizer and the consorts’ dress are both the seasons of Konkoku, aren’t they?”

“Is it to your liking?” Ho asked with a sweet smile upon hearing Shusei’s translation. Shar nodded enthusiastically as he skillfully extended his chopsticks toward the food.

He noticed the theme right away. Prince Shar is a keen connoisseur. Rimi was

sure of it. Only a tasteful connoisseur would choose to visit Konkoku specifically during the snowy season. *I'm sure he will understand the consorts' entertainment.*

Rimi was not alone—So, Ho, and On's expressions were also filled with confidence. Yo, however, was her usual self, looking around restlessly like a little bird when she noticed something.

"Oh my, it's snowing," Yo said, looking up at the sky wearing an innocent, cheerful smile.

Thin clouds must have covered some part of the otherwise clear sky, as despite the sun being out, tiny snowflakes were fluttering down. It almost seemed like a trick of the eye.

As though Yo's innocent demeanor was part of the plan, On quickly continued.

"Our attire represents the four seasons, as does this first dish. To complete this theme, we shall read you a poem about the seasons. Even is shadow, and odd is light. If two seasons come together to form a shadow, we shall add another to turn it into light," On said.

As Shusei translated, Shar gave a mischievous grin.

"Prince Shar, do you have any words related to the four seasons that you like? It does not matter if they are in Saisakokuan. We will have them translated before using them," So said with a smile.

Shar was proficient in Konkokuan, so he had no actual need for Shusei's translation. But he still waited until Shusei had finished speaking before stating four words in Saisakokuan with an amused smirk.

"That's..." Shusei said with a concerned expression.

"What did Prince Shar say, Cuisinologist?" Ho asked.

"Well...Prince Shar says he wants you to use the words 'grand,' 'rain,' 'blue,' and 'bright,'" Shusei explained.

Rimi furrowed her brow. The words Shar had given were none other than translations of part of the four consorts' very own names: "rei," "rin," "heki,"

and “mei.”

He’s challenging them.

“Prince Shar says that if the four consorts represent the four seasons, then he wants you to read a poem about yourselves,” Shusei continued.

When asked for words relating to the four seasons, most people would have thought of flowers, clouds, rivers, mountains, and the like. Instead, choosing the consorts’ names must have been Shar saying that he wouldn’t be satisfied with something cliché. A surprising choice of words meant that they would have been unable to prepare beforehand—even if the consorts had prepared poems related to the four seasons for this occasion, they were unlikely to have prepared any related to their own names, or so Shar must have surmised. He was trying to put the consorts’ skill to the test.

Gulzari Shar smirked. He was a connoisseur, and that was exactly why he was so quick to issue a challenge. However, So quickly gave him a confident smile, as she suddenly started to read a verse.

“The grand snowy mountains, viewed from up high.”



My, he’s putting us to the test. Noble Consort So smiled as she sent Shar a piercing gaze. The way he had offered such a devious theme made So wonder if perhaps he was familiar with Konkokuan poetry. He must have at the very least heard of it at one point and mistakenly assumed that it was simply a matter of putting together a series of traditional words prepared in advance, which had led him to choose such a tricky theme.

However, Konkokuan poetry had traditionally been an art of improvisation. Educated as the consorts were, they were fully aware of this.

Shar was visibly surprised at how quickly So had come up with an opening verse.

It’s still too early to be surprised. So looked at Yo, who was sitting next to her. Yo looked hesitant and panicked as she was not very good at poetry. So glared at her intently. *Read a verse!*



That's terrifying, Noble Consort So!

Feeling the pressure from So, Pure Consort Yo trembled with fear. She had prepared a good number of verses related to seasons in advance, but she had never expected to have to use her own name.

But I'm bad at this!

Yo took a quick look around her, her eyes meeting Rimi's. She felt as though Rimi was encouraging her, and she desperately came up with a verse.

"Their shadows raining over the capital nigh."

It was not a very elegant verse, but it could have been worse. She had made use of two interpretations of the word "rain"—"downpour" and the similar-sounding "reign"—and just about managed to make the verse rhyme. She wanted at least a little credit for her work.

Yo gave Ho a pleading look, and Ho effortlessly continued the poem.



"Within a tower under the vast blue sky."

This posed no challenge whatsoever to Virtuous Consort Ho. It was no different from telling simple jokes at a gathering. If Shar thought that this would be a tricky theme, then he was sorely underestimating the consorts' skill.

Ho looked at On, who similarly smiled confidently.



"Lies our bright ruler's watchful eye."

Worthy Consort On gave Shar a look as if to ask, "Well?"

Shusei was translating as the consorts read their verses. As they finished, Shar stared at them in astonishment.



"Viewing the large and majestic snowy mountains from up high, the mountains' downpouring shadows reign over the capital of Annei nigh. Inside a tower under a blue, gloomy sky, our wise and cheerful emperor oversees the lands with his watchful eye," Shusei translated the poem.

The poem followed the seasonal theme by depicting a winter landscape while also being a celebration of the very feast they were partaking in. The given words all had a double meaning—“grand” meaning “large” and “majestic,” “rain” taken to mean both “downpour” and “reign,” “blue” meaning the color itself and “gloomy,” and “bright” meaning “wise” and “cheerful.” All verses rhymed as required.

Gulzari Shar widened his eyes and said something in Saisakokuan. However, it was clear from his expression and tone that he had said something akin to “magnificent.”

Marvelous. Rimi mentally gave the consorts a bow out of respect. The consorts had faced Shar’s sudden challenge with a brilliant display.

The consorts ordered Hakurei to bring them instruments. Hakurei and three aides brought them a two-stringed fiddle, a zither, and a lute. The consorts moved next to the guardrail where they started playing a relaxing melody.

Shar had come in a carefree mood simply seeking to kill some time. But now he had a serious look on his face as he turned to Shohi.

“What are the four consorts to the emperor?” Shar asked, and Shusei translated.

“They are my brides as well as my retainers,” Shohi replied.

The mood has changed, Rimi noted. Shar had started becoming interested in Shohi and the consorts as a result of the consorts’ performances.

It was time for the next course.

“Please bring the second and the third dish in at the same time,” Rimi whispered to Hakurei.

Hakurei looked a bit confused, but he said nothing as he started setting the table with the two dishes. Shar started speaking happily upon seeing the second dish.

“Prince Shar is delighted to see Saisakokuan food,” Shusei translated. “He is asking if Shuri made this.”

“Indeed. The first dish was made by the head of Konkoku’s imperial cooks, the

Chief of Dining, Yo Koshin. The second dish was made by the Saisakokuan cook, Shuri,” Rimi explained.

The second dish consisted of chicken grilled with fragrant spices and beans simmered with spices. The fragrance caused even the consorts, who were still playing their instruments, to glance at the food with a jealous look.

“What kind of food is this?” Shohi mumbled to himself upon seeing this new, yet indescribably fragrant, chicken dish.

“It’s Tandoori Murgh,” Shar replied. He had apparently been so delighted to see Saisakokuan food that he had accidentally revealed his ability to understand Konkoku.

Shusei raised an eyebrow slightly. Shar, catching himself, gave Shohi a panicked look—Shohi, however, simply nodded.

“I see. That is a difficult name. We must be sure to give it a simpler name when we introduce it to Konkoku,” Shohi said jokingly.

Shar made a perplexed expression, seemingly wondering if his mistake had escaped Shohi. But Rimi could tell that Shohi had noticed. He had simply intentionally chosen not to point it out.

Shohi shifted his gaze to the third dish.

“These must be baozi. This is Konkoku food. Is this other dish the only Saisakokuan dish for today?” Shohi asked.

The third dish consisted of soft and white steamed baozi. But Rimi shook her head at Shohi’s question.

“Your Majesty, that is not Konkoku food,” Rimi said.

“This is baozi, is it not?” Shohi asked with a puzzled look, and Shar looked similarly confused.

“This third dish has two names. The Konkoku name is ‘erguo baozi.’ The Saisakokuan name is ‘do deshon ke.’ Please enjoy your meal.”

This is Konkokuan cooking. Shar looked at the soft white baozi in front of him dubiously as he picked one up.

Many Konkokuans would frequent the Southern Trinity. As such, there was also plenty of Konkokuan food to be had. It was rare for Shar to visit the Trinity without having Konkokuan cooking at least once. He had never disliked the taste, and there were even times he enjoyed it. But there was still nothing better to him than the taste of the Saisakokuan food that he had grown up with. As he would often start craving that food, he always made sure to bring a Saisakokuan cook with him whenever he traveled abroad.

The second dish, Tandoori Murgh, was Shuri's creation. It had the usual strong and pleasant fragrance. Under normal circumstances, he would have preferred that dish, but Rimi's description had piqued his interest. She had claimed that the third dish was not Konkokuan food, and she had given it two names. The meaning of "do deshon ke" in Saisakokuan was something akin to "of two countries."

Shuri must have come up with that name. There was no mistaking that this was Konkokuan food, so Shar was unable to grasp why Shuri had given it such a name.

Shuri had always been quieter than the other boys, and he was not one to run up to Shar and pester him for his attention. He was always serious to a fault as he devoted himself to Shar. Shuri was a nice boy, but Shar had no idea what his original personality was like or what went through his mind. Maybe he gave the dish this name as a joke—or perhaps he became fed up with Konkokuans pestering him and gave it an odd name out of spite. It was impossible to tell.

Despite how long he's served me, it seems I don't actually know much about him. It was the first time Shar had realized this. *I will have to make time to talk to him more. But right now, this food comes first.*

Shar bit off about half of the baozi. As he did, his eyes widened.

This is Saisakokuan food!

From the outside, the baozi looked like any other Konkokuan food, yet the inside contained plenty of spices. The filling was spicy and aromatic. The finely diced chicken had been pickled in fermented cow's milk, making it soft and

removing any bad smell. The sweetness of roasted vegetables mingled with standard Saisakokuan spices to create a fragrant and spicy yet sweet Saisakokuan dish. But it was wrapped in faintly sweet, white baozi. Eating them together softened the intensity of the spices and created an indescribable sensation.

“What kind of cuisine is this?” Shar uttered without thinking. He had asked the Wakokuan palace woman in charge of the food—in Konkokuan.

Rimi gave him a soft smile. Seeing this, Shar realized his mistake, but it was too late. Konkokuan had come out of his own mouth. He had no hope of hiding it anymore. The Konkokuan emperor would soon be burning with fury.

Gravely lamenting his mistake, Shar turned his gaze to Shohi. The emperor still had the same, relaxed expression as before. But just as Shar wondered if perhaps Shohi hadn’t heard him, his hopes were crushed.

“You may use whichever language you are most comfortable with, be it Konkokuan or Saisakokuan, Prince Shar,” Shohi said—in Saisakokuan.

Shar looked at him, dumbfounded.



“Wait...you speak Saisakokuan, Your Majesty?” Shar asked in Konkokuan.

“I only know the basics. I cannot speak complicated Saisakokuan,” Shohi replied in Saisakokuan.

“Why?”

“This is my form of retaliation. Did I surprise you?” Shohi said with a smirk. It was the first time Shohi had given an honest smile since the feast started.

Shar had been stupefied, but then he suddenly started laughing.

“Yes, you got me, Your Majesty! When did you realize?” Shar asked.

“You confessed as much to my palace woman in the Palace of Twin Dragons, did you not? Did you truly believe she would not tell me?” Shohi said, switching back to Konkokuan.

“Yes, I was hoping so! Then you mean to tell me that you learned Saisakokuan just for the sake of retaliation?”

“No, the consorts told me that it is important to understand the other person,” Shohi said, glancing toward the consorts who were still softly playing music. “I wished to give you the best treatment that Konkoku could provide. Thus, I asked the consorts, who excel at entertaining others, and then decided to learn Saisakokuan while I left the arrangement of the feast to a trusted servant.”

“Yes, Shusei there is the one who arranged the feast, correct? But who made this food? I still haven’t received an answer as to what kind of food this is. Rimi, what is this food?” Shar asked.

“Please give me a moment,” Rimi said, bowing slightly before rushing down the stairs.

Prince Shar asked what kind of food it is! Shar had demonstrated a strong interest in the food. This was the very reason Rimi had served it to him. Now, the final touches were needed—but Rimi was not the right person for the task. While it was true that it had come to be by Rimi’s hand, it was Konkokuan and Saisakokuan techniques that had made it what it was, so it was not right to say that Rimi had made it. She had simply thought of it. It was those two who had made it.

“Chief of Dining! Shuri! Come up to the lookout!” Rimi spoke through her panting as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

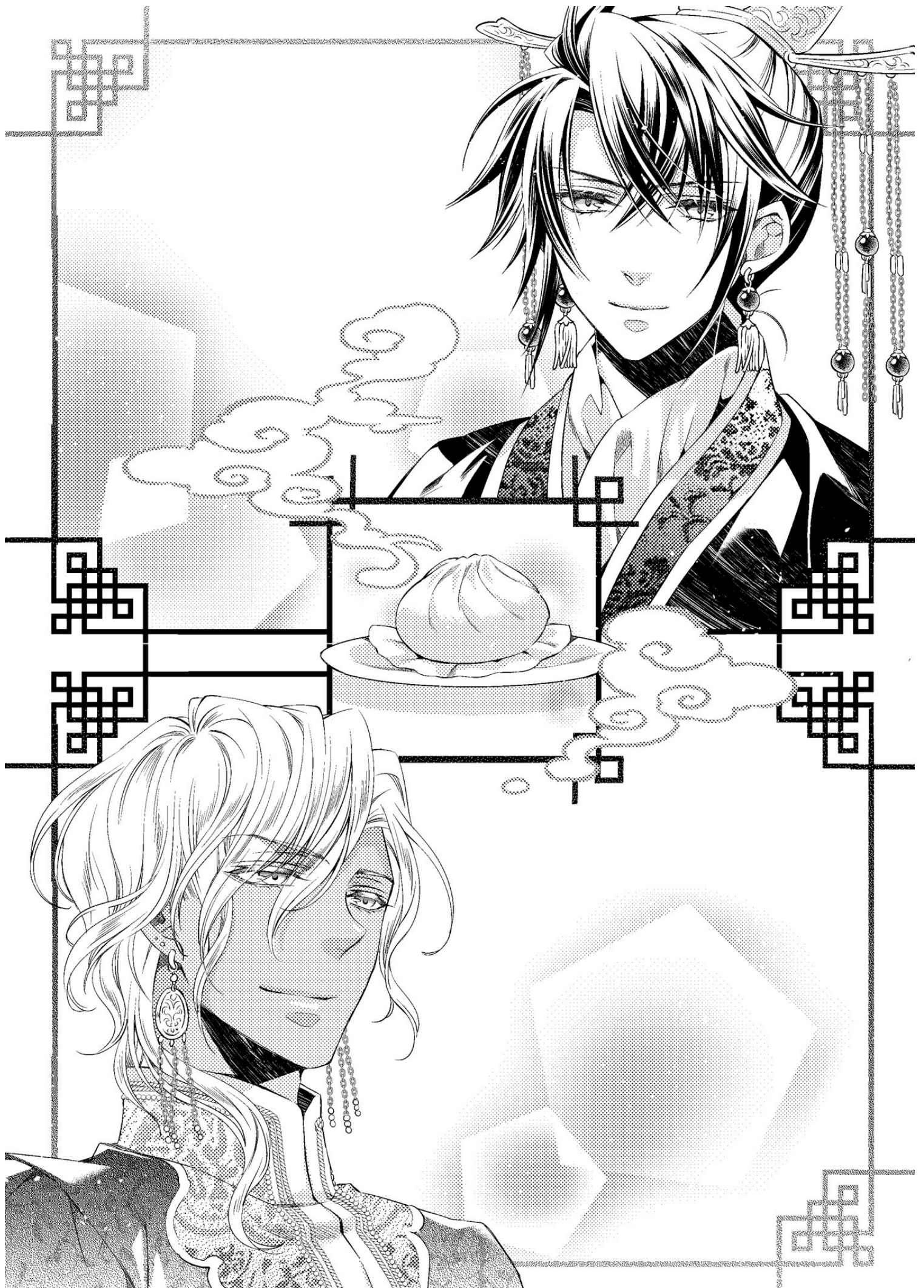
“What’s going on?” Koshin asked.

“Why?” Shuri said.

Rimi grabbed the perplexed pair by their wrists and pulled them up the stairs.

“Hey, what d’ya think you’re doing?!” Koshin yelled as he almost tripped.

“Both of you need to attend the feast as the cooks who made the third dish! Prince Gulzari Shar asked what kind of food that dish is, so you need to answer him together!” Rimi said.



“Are you out of your mind?! I don’t have any rank! I can’t be in the presence of His Majesty!” Koshin said.

“It’s to answer a state guest’s question, so I’m sure he’ll look the other way!”

“But...what kind of food *is* it?” Shuri asked with a troubled look.

“That’s what I want you to figure out together!”

“What? On the spot?”

“Yes!”

Just as Rimi answered, they had reached the second floor of the tower. Rimi pushed the pair in front of the divider, and both of them froze as if petrified by the music and Shar and Shohi’s gazes. Rimi walked up next to them and bowed.

“These two made that third dish,” Rimi said. “They are the head of the imperial cooks, Yo Koshin, and the cook of the Saisakokuan delegation, Shuri. They will explain what kind of food the dish is.”

Koshin and Shuri exchanged glances.

“Well, what kind of food is it?” Koshin whispered, pale-faced.

“I’m not sure, what kind of food do you think it is?” Shuri replied with a quizzical look.

“That’s what I’m asking you!”

“Well, I don’t know either.”

“It’s certainly no Konkokuan food. I guess that makes it Saisakokuan food?”

“It’s not Saisakokuan food either. So...what do we do?”

Though the two of them were whispering to each other, their conversation was clearly audible to the others present. As Shohi and Shar watched the scene unfold, they gradually started smiling.

“I guess we could combine the names and call it Konsaisa food,” Koshin suggested.

“Why does ‘Kon’ go first? It could just as well be ‘Saisakon,’” Shuri said.

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes, they’re completely different!”

The way they argued back and forth was like a stand-up routine.

“How so?” Koshin said.

“The feel of it,” Shuri replied.

“They’re just the same!”

Then, explosive laughter erupted, which startled Koshin and Shuri, while Shusei looked on awkwardly. The laughter belonged to Shohi and Shar. Both were roaring with laughter. After a while, the laughter quieted down, and Shohi and Shar exchanged glances, only to start laughing again even louder than before. Koshin and Shuri were dumbfounded, but Rimi gave a relieved smile.

This is exactly what I hoped to see.

There were a number of ways to please a god during Holy Communion—displaying reverence to the god, making the god feel at ease, or causing the god to laugh. Similarly, there were many things people could gain from a meal—ease, truth, hope, or even comedy. These feelings are what bestowed meaning to the food Rimi served.

“It’s a heartwarming sight, don’t you think, Your Majesty? Seeing people from different countries, different cultures, and who speak different languages, arguing like brothers,” Shar said, still not having fully calmed down.

Shar looked at the Konsaisa—or perhaps Saisakon—baozi in front of him. It was soft on the outside but spicy on the inside.

“I never imagined that Saisakokuan cooking could be used for such a novel dish. I have never tasted anything like it before. It’s delicious, and you can eat it with a carefree mind. Since it only makes use of the fundamentals of Konkokuan and Saisakokuan cooking, even commoners would be able to enjoy this,” Shar continued.

Shohi finally calmed down too, but his expression was still cheerful.

“I am relieved to see that you are satisfied, Prince Shar. Chief of Dining, Shuri, I commend your efforts. You may leave. Decide amongst yourselves whether to call it Konsaisa or Saisakon food. Once you have reached an agreement, inform

me and Prince Shar,” Shohi said.

Koshin and Shuri had been stupefied, but seeing Shohi smile at them, they both looked relieved and left. As they descended the stairs, you could hear them still arguing over which name sounded better.

The consorts were still playing their instruments without pause, only occasionally looking up to see what was happening. It was evident how cultivated they were as they were much calmer than the average musician would have been.

As Shar’s proficiency with the Konkokuan language had come to light, an interpreter was no longer needed. Now, the time had come for a discussion between the emperor and the emissary. Sensing this, Shusei retreated to behind the divider, and Rimi followed his example. Rimi looked up at Shusei in the darkness and their eyes met.

“You did well, Rimi,” Shusei said with a kind smile, quietly so as to not be heard from the other side of the divider.

Shusei’s gaze was so endearing that Rimi’s chest started hurting, and she smiled back at him. Though she could not speak of her feelings for him, being praised in this manner still made her overjoyed.

“This was only possible thanks to your hard work arranging the feast, Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

Shusei had been the one to bring the consorts’ entertainment and the food together. He had mediated between the consorts and the cooks, ensuring that there was a common theme to both. It was thanks to him that everything had worked out this well. He had also been the one to decide on the location. The open landscape had encouraged Shohi and Shar to open up to each other.

From the other side of the divider, Rimi could hear Shar’s voice harmonize with the soft music.

“I have been acting childish and foolish. As much as it shames me to admit, I came here with the intention of sightseeing, having no desire to partake in negotiations,” Shar confessed. “Thus, I made sure to avoid any meetings with you, and I avoided speaking Konkokuan. You saw through it all, and yet you

didn't utter even one complaint in the face of my disrespect."

"I did get my chance to retaliate," Shohi remarked. After a moment's silence, he continued. "To be frank with you, I did lose my composure. However, my advisor, Shusei, convinced me to calm down. A certain palace woman then helped me understand that rather than bothering you by only talking about trade, I first needed to understand you. Though this is a discussion between countries, a country is made up of its people. Thus, we must first come to an understanding, person to person. Negotiations and bargaining can come later. I will take my time."

Shohi looked Shar straight in the eye.

"But would you not say that taking new risks is an important part of the development of a country?" Shohi continued. "Just as Konkokuan and Saisakokuan food came together to create a new kind of food, I believe that if you want to see a new world, you must intermingle and expand. And that sounds terribly fun, do you not agree?"

Shar nodded once as though understanding Shohi's point before quietly answering.

"Let me be honest, Your Majesty. You are still terribly young, and compared to my wise brother, you are—if you will forgive my saying so—inexperienced as an emperor," Shar said.

"I am aware," Shohi replied.

Shar gave Shohi a kind smile in response to his discontent reply.

"Still, I see great promise in that youth of yours. The way you desire new worlds is indicative of your country's youth and will in turn contribute to its development. Despite my age, I am somewhat of an adventurous person, you see. I would dearly love to see this new world you speak of. As you said, I am sure it would be fun," Shar said.

Shar's eyes were shining like those of a boy dreaming of the future.

"And not to mention, you are magnanimous enough to accept being told that you are inexperienced by a foreign emissary. That magnanimity of yours outshines even my brother's. It is no surprise that you are blessed with

excellent retainers. I respect that part of you from the bottom of my heart.”

Shohi quietly observed Shar’s smile with a surprised expression for a moment before responding slightly bashfully.

“I am gladdened by your words,” Shohi said.

“Saisakoku has not traded with anyone other than the Southern Trinity for the past century, and my brother is a conservative emperor, so it may be difficult to establish diplomatic relations between Saisakoku and Konkoku soon,” Shar explained. “Still, I believe that establishing relations with your country would be beneficial to mine. Konkoku is a fine country with fine people and fine food. There must be something there for Saisakoku to gain as well. As soon as I return home, I shall inform my brother as such.”

Rimi and Shusei exchanged surprised glances behind the divider.

Prince Shar said that he will try to convince the Saisakokuan emperor to establish relations with Konkoku!

“You have my gratitude,” Shohi replied solemnly.

“Rimi, did you hear that?” Shusei asked, his eyes shining with joy.

“Yes, I did,” Rimi said.

As a sense of relief washed over them, Rimi accidentally touched Shusei’s hand. Startled, they looked at each other, but in their joy and excitement, they instinctively took each other’s hands.

“Just...for now,” Shusei whispered with an apologetic look.

Rimi responded with a small nod, euphoric from this fleeting happiness.

It’s just for now.

Seven days later, the day had come for the Saisakokuan delegation to depart from Konkoku.

Chapter 7: Fate Is Awakened by the Sounding Bell

I

Shuri entered the kitchen carrying his box of spices after breakfast had just ended. The court cooks and servant boys were relaxing when the unfamiliar Saisakokuan's sudden appearance caught their attention.

Used to gazes like theirs, Shuri ignored them as he called out for his friend Koshin, who appeared from the room west of the kitchen.

"Oh! Hey, kid. I heard you're heading back home today. If you don't hurry up and get back to your delegation, they'll leave without you." Koshin spoke as brusquely as ever, but his eyes betrayed a sense of affection toward Shuri.

"It's fine. There's no way Prince Shar will forget about me and leave me behind," Shuri replied confidently.

After the feast with the emperor of Konkoku at the Palace of Twin Dragons, Shar had summoned Shuri that very same evening to ask him about the food. Shuri had been so happy that he had excitedly explained at length about Koshin, Rimi, and how they had made the food. Shar had listened intently with his interest piqued the entire time.

Ever since then, Shar hadn't mixed up Shuri's name again, and the way Shar looked at him now seemed much more caring than before. He had also started asking Shuri about his cooking every day, treating him less like a servant that he'd taken in from the streets and more like a proper cook.

Shuri had been very hesitant to go to Konkoku since he had no fond memories of the country or its people. Even after initially arriving, his distaste for Konkoku had not subsided. But after meeting Rimi and Koshin, something had changed. He was now happy that he had come here with Shar as it had given him something he had always desired. Both Konkoku and Konkokuans seemed far better than what he had experienced as a child.

Shuri held out his box toward Koshin.

“Koshin, take this. I’m giving it to you,” Shuri said.

“These are spices, aren’t they?! Are you sure about this?!” Koshin said hesitantly, though his eyes were eager.

“Yes, I am,” Shuri said, nonchalantly handing Koshin the box.

“They’re expensive, right? Are you *really* sure?”

“I can get all the spices I want when I get home. This is my thanks.”

“Thanks? For what?”

“For making food together with me.”

“Then it’s Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu you should be thanking. Then again, I guess she’s either in the rear palace or the cuisinology hall. Not even you would be allowed into the Ministry of Rites, huh?”

“I can’t see her?”

“She stops by here every evening to prepare His Majesty’s supper.”

“I can’t wait until then, so I can’t see her,” Shuri said with a disappointed tone. “Will you thank Rimi for me?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Bye, Koshin. Use those spices to make Saisakon food.”

“It’s Konsaisa!”

The two of them had yet to agree on a name. Koshin shot Shuri a stern look before bursting into laughter while Shuri waved goodbye to him.

I hope I can see Rimi again one day. Shuri wanted to thank that kind Wakokuan princess. But if Saisakoku and Konkoku were to establish diplomatic relations, perhaps the day would come when they could see each other more easily.

The delegation had already finished preparing to leave and were waiting in the front garden of the Hall of Ultimate Supremacy for the departure ceremony to start. Shuri hurried back to the delegation, and Shar called out to him the

moment he arrived. Wondering what Shar might need from him, Shuri walked up to him with an anxious expression.

“I didn’t see you anywhere, so I was getting worried! We’re almost about to depart, so you can’t just walk off like that,” Shar warned, and Shuri turned slightly bashful.

“I’m sorry,” Shuri said with a smile. Shuri belonged by his kind master’s side, and Konkoku had made being by his master’s side more comfortable than he could ever have hoped for.

Fine snow danced in the air. A snowflake landed on Shuri’s cheek, but it didn’t feel particularly cold. He no longer hated snow as much as he once had.



The delegation is returning to Saisakoku today... I wish I could have seen Shuri one last time, Rimi thought as she silently continued her writings alone in the cuisinology hall.

Shohi, his bodyguard Jotetsu, and even Shusei as well as the four consorts were attending the departure ceremony. Hakurei was also there, escorting Shohi and the consorts. A simple palace woman like Rimi, however, had no place there. She was sad not to be able to see them off. Still, if Konkoku and Saisakoku established diplomatic relations one day, both Gulzari Shar and Shuri would be able to visit Konkoku more frequently. All Rimi had to do was wait.

“Master Shusei’s job as an advisor is ending soon too...”

Rimi was beside herself with joy at being able to spend time with Shusei again as his assistant. Yet she was simultaneously terrified, wondering whether she would be able to control her emotions when she was alone with him again. As wrong as she knew it was, there seemed to be no stopping her growing feelings of love.

Tama was playing with a brush on the desk, away from Rimi’s work, when she suddenly froze, turned her round, blue eyes to Rimi with a worried look, and squeaked.

“What’s wrong, Tama?” Rimi asked as she petted Tama on the head with her finger.

Suddenly, Tama made a jerking motion, before jumping off the desk and hiding under Rimi's skirt.

"Huh? What? What's the matter?"

Then, the door to the cuisinology hall opened up, and an old man unfamiliar to Rimi stood in the doorway. He had a long, thick beard completely white, and his hair was the same color. His skin, however, was firm, and his posture was that of someone half his age.

Rimi was surprised to see the man, but he also seemed similarly surprised.

"What is a palace woman doing in the Ministry of Rites?" the man asked.

"This is the cuisinology hall, which the cuisinologist uses for his research. I have been appointed as his assistant by His Majesty. I am Setsu Rimi, Lady of Precious Bevy," Rimi explained.

Since Rimi did not know the status of the man, to be on the safe side, she stood and bowed. The man stared at Rimi in astonishment.

"A palace woman being a scholar's assistant? Unbelievable. Between this and appointing the four consorts as his retainers, the current emperor seems far too eccentric," the man said.

Rimi couldn't believe the blatant criticism of the emperor. She furrowed her brow ever so slightly.

"Um... I hope you don't mind me asking, but who might you be?" Rimi asked.

"I am Ho Neison. Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, was it? Very well, you might as well prove yourself useful. Show me outside the Ministry of Rites," he demanded. "Things have changed quite drastically around here, and I do not know where to find the gate."

Despite his arrogant attitude, he was, essentially, a lost elderly man. He must have worked at the court as an official in the past and ended up disoriented after coming to visit for the first time in a while.

"Understood," Rimi said, feeling slightly sorry for him. She walked in front of Neison and then left the hall with him. "What business did you have with the Ministry of Rights?"

“I came to meet with the Minister of Rites,” Neison responded and narrowed his eyes. “I hear there has been some progress in establishing diplomatic relations with Saisakoku. Considering you work in the outer palace, have you heard any rumors?”

Rimi nodded confidently. She hadn’t heard mere rumors—she was directly involved.

“It seems His Majesty and the emperor of Saisakoku will be meeting to negotiate at some point,” Rimi said.

Shar’s advice to the Saisakokuan emperor had been a large step toward establishing relations between the two countries after a century of no progress. Three days prior, Shohi had received a report from Shar that said that the Saisakokuan emperor was likely to request to meet with the Konkokuan emperor before long.

“Oh? So it’s true,” Neison said in a low voice, a sinister light flashing in his eyes—though Rimi did not notice.

The two left the premises of the Ministry of Rites and entered the passageway outside when a group of women wearing gorgeous outfits came walking from the opposite direction. As they drew closer, Rimi saw that they were the four consorts being led back to the rear palace by Hakurei. They must have finished seeing the Saisakokuan delegation off.

“The four consorts are passing by. Would you mind stepping to the side?” Rimi said, looking back at Neison.

“No need,” Neison responded, arrogantly shaking his head.

“But...”

“I may not have a position in the government, but I have first rank. Not to mention...”

“Grandfather!” one of the beautifully dressed consorts said—it was Virtuous Consort Ho.

Huh? Rimi looked from the Virtuous Consort to Neison as she had a sudden realization. *Ho... Of course, the Ho house! This man is the head of the Ho house*

and Virtuous Consort Ho's grandfather!

Virtuous Consort Ho stepped away from the group and swiftly approached the pair.

"Grandfather, what are you doing here?" Ho asked.

"I have business here. Have you been well, Hekishu?" Neison replied.

"Yes, I have."

Hakurei and the other consorts also walked up to Neison and greeted him by bowing. Neison shot Hakurei a piercing glare for some reason, but Hakurei responded with his usual captivating yet vague smile.

"I am glad to see you are well, Lord Ho," Hakurei said.

"I would have been, had I not had to see you."

Hearing this, Ho's beautiful brow twitched. She looked toward Hakurei, who was still maintaining his smile.

"The consorts are on their way back to the rear palace. Now, if you'll excuse me," Hakurei said curtly, gesturing for the consorts, including Ho, to follow him.

Neison watched Hakurei disappear with a gaze that seemed to be plotting something.

"Is something the matter with the consorts? Or perhaps with the palace attendant?" Rimi asked.

"No," Neison replied. "Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, I appreciate you showing me here. This is far enough."

Neison turned his back to Rimi and started walking toward the gate.



"Hakurei, have you met my grandfather before?" Ho asked as she sped up her pace, walking up next to Hakurei, who was leading the group.

"Not at all, Virtuous Consort Ho," Hakurei replied with his usual smile. "This was our first time meeting."

Ho found it unlikely that Hakurei had met Neison while he was still the crown prince, and he had only become a eunuch after Neison had retired. Yet Hakurei

had appeared to have recognized him. The fact that he had known to call him “Lord Ho” after only seeing his face was proof enough.

Liar, Ho berated Hakurei in her mind. Had she berated him openly or questioned him, he would only have deflected any accusations, and she would have become irritated for nothing. Complaining silently was the best she could do.

Ho felt uneasy, fearing that something might happen to Hakurei. She cast her eyes down in worry.

I don't want anything else to happen to Hakurei.



Hakurei... I cannot imagine that a man in his position has no ambitions, Ho Neison thought as he passed through the gate on his way home.

This had been Neison's first time visiting the imperial palace since retiring over fifteen years ago. Ever since his son Seishu had disappeared, it had pained him to come across officials around the same age as his son. If not for his job, he would never have had it in him to visit the imperial palace.

Now was not the time for such concerns, however. The Ho house was inching ever closer to being stripped of all power and influence. To prevent that from happening, Neison needed to at least secure the right to trade with Saisakoku. That was why he had come today.

Seishu had been Neison's only biological son. Hekishu's father, Soyo, was adopted. This was a widely known fact. Soyo also had no experience working as an official, nor did he have any connections. Thus, Neison had no choice but to visit the court himself.

Will the Ho house survive this?

As he walked down the passageway, worrying about the future of his house, he saw the emperor, Shohi, walking down a cloister of the Hall of New Harmony far away. Neison's mood turned sour as he cursed Shohi for the detestable child he thought him to be. But then his eyes turned to the chancellor, the aides, the bodyguards, and finally the grand councilor walking next to the emperor, and he nearly fainted.

“Seishu...!” Neison nearly screamed, and he quickly covered his mouth with his sleeve.

No, that can't be! That's impossible!

There walked a man with the very same face as his son who had gone missing over twenty years prior.



“It’s finally over...” Shohi said, sitting on the sofa of his personal quarters.

“You did well, Your Majesty,” Jotetsu said as he handed Shohi a cup of tea. “As long as Gulzari Shar gives a favorable report to the emperor of Saisakoku, we should make headway in the negotiations. This is a major achievement, Your Majesty.”

“But this is all thanks to Shusei, the consorts, and Rimi.”

Jotetsu walked up to the window and seemed to ponder something emotionlessly for a moment. It was rare to see him like this.

“What is the matter, Jotetsu?” Shohi asked.

“Your Majesty, do you wish to make love to Rimi?”

The question was so abrupt and frank that Shohi nearly spat out his tea.

“Where did *that* come from all of a sudden?!” Shohi asked, flustered.

Shohi had assumed that Jotetsu was simply making fun of him as always, but when he turned around, Jotetsu had a frighteningly composed look on his face. Shohi sensed something unnatural in his eyes.

“What is it, Jotetsu? Is something on your mind?” Shohi said.

“Your Majesty, if you want to make Rimi yours, you need to make a move as soon as possible. If you let your guard down, she might become someone else’s,” Jotetsu explained. “As it currently stands, you have given her permission to enter the outer palace. As a result, you can see her each morning—but at the same time, she can see someone else.”

“Someone else? Are you talking about Shusei? The two of them seem to have no such relationship.”

“I won’t point the finger at anyone in particular. I’m simply saying that if you want something, you should make it yours while you still can.”

Shohi felt as though Jotetsu might be talking about Shusei, but at the same time, perhaps he was only imagining it. After all, he had noticed nothing suspicious between Shusei and Rimi. Still, even if there was nothing between them yet, there was the possibility that they would develop feelings for each other sooner or later. He may have been the Loveless Scholar, but Shusei was still a man and a normal human. There was no guarantee that he would not end up having improper feelings for the woman near him.

As far as Rimi went, compared to the selfish, violent, and childing emperor that was Shohi, perhaps she would prefer the wise and gentle cuisinology scholar. If that were to happen, Shohi could claim his right as the emperor to make Rimi his, but if he did, he would never be able to have her heart as well. He would have obtained nothing but an empty husk.

That would be unbearable.

Shohi wanted her to love him. He wanted her to look at him with her adorable eyes and call him “Your Majesty” with a sweet voice that showed how she adored him from the bottom of her heart. For that to happen, he had to make her his as soon as possible. He had to make Rimi realize that his desire for her was real.

There was only one way Shohi could think of to do so.

II

Ten days had passed since the Saisakokuan delegation had left. Shohi had received a letter from Gulzari Shar stating that he had arrived in Saisakoku safely and that he had detailed what had happened in Konkoku to the Saisakokuan emperor. As a result, the emperor of Saisakoku had decided to consider negotiating with Konkoku. He had expressed an interest in meeting with Shohi unofficially by the border of the two countries in spring once the snow had melted. It appeared that Shar must have done a fine job at explaining how fascinating the culture of Konkoku was as it was unlikely that the emperor of Saisakoku would have been interested otherwise.

The letter had delighted not only Shohi, but the chancellor Shu Kojin, the Minister of Rites, and the Minister of Revenue as well. The rumor was sure to spread like wildfire. Ma Ijun, the wealthy merchant of Annei, would soon be dancing with joy. At this point, it would be fair to say that this had been a tremendous success.

Now my work as His Majesty's advisor is finished, and I can go back to researching cuisinology. Since the delegation had departed, Shusei's services as an advisor were no longer required.

With Shohi's permission, Shusei was walking briskly to the cuisinology hall.

Shusei was happy to have been able to assist the emperor, having done everything he could to advise him. But he still preferred not to get involved in politics. He was much more at ease dealing with mushrooms, tree roots, and fish eyes. It suited him better too.

Besides...

The snow appeared to weigh heavily on the cuisinology hall's roof. As Shusei opened the door, warm air, along with the smell of ink and paper, greeted him. Rimi was inside, choosing books from the archive with the Quinary Dragon riding on her shoulder. Hearing the door open, she turned around and smiled softly at Shusei.

"Master Shusei!" she exclaimed.

Once I return to my cuisinology work, I'll have Rimi next to me. They could never speak of their feelings for each other, but as long as they kept quiet and never touched, surely simply being near each other would still be deemed acceptable. For now, that was enough for Shusei, even if they had no hope for a future together.

As Shusei stepped inside, Rimi happily ran over to him. She was so charming that his heart started racing, and he didn't know what to do with himself. It seemed these feelings still refused to leave him alone, so all he could do was try to find some way of suppressing them.

The Quinary Dragon ran down Rimi's back and climbed up to one of the beams of the hall—but instead of curling up like it usually did, it instead stared

intently at Shusei from above.

I'm sure the Quinary Dragon won't look kindly upon these improper feelings of mine, and Rimi is not in a position that allows her to fall in love with a cuisinology scholar. Shusei realized that he needed to have a proper talk with Rimi.

"I will be returning to the cuisinology hall starting today," Shusei explained. "But would you mind if we first talk about the two of us?"

"All right..." Rimi said with a nod, although she spoke in a worried tone. She must have understood what Shusei was planning to discuss.

Shusei invited her to sit down on a sofa in the back. He sat down next to her and took a deep breath.

"The day that the Saisakokuan delegation first arrived, I told you here that you are dear to me," Shusei said.

Rimi's cheeks turned visibly red, apparently remembering what had happened that evening.

"Yes..." Rimi said in a feeble voice.

"I meant what I said. And...that still hasn't changed." Claiming it to have been a lie would have been all too disrespectful toward her—and had he told such a lie, Shusei would probably have become unable to suppress his feelings. He had no choice but to admit it.

Rimi turned even redder as she looked down. Even her ears were red. Shusei felt a sudden urge to kiss her faintly red earlobes, and he averted his gaze.

"I...also..." Rimi said with a tiny voice, still looking at the floor. "I feel the same."

Upon hearing this, Shusei almost lost control, but he desperately reined himself in.

"But these feelings are impermissible. We need to bury them and act like nothing more than a scholar and his assistant, just like before," Shusei said.

"Bury our feelings... So we're killing them, in other words," Rimi said.

Shusei smiled awkwardly. Rimi still had a tenuous grasp on Konkokuan sometimes, but her merciless-sounding words felt like a perfect description.

“Yes, that’s right. As sad as it is for these feelings to be killed so soon after being born with no memory to remain of them,” Shusei said.

“If only we had at least one memory, I would have something to console me after killing them...”

Shusei wavered at Rimi’s sad voice.

Perhaps so. Or perhaps the opposite is true. If memories remained to console them, then would these feelings really die so easily? Perhaps the memories would only serve to provoke their feelings, making them refuse to die.

Though Shusei had been the one to suggest burying their feelings, he suspected that it would take more than one attempt to kill them. No matter how much he tried, they would revive again to torment him. If so, maybe one last memory might give him what he needed to kill them. That way he could convince his feelings that they could die in peace as that memory would remain. It would be a memory for the sake of killing his feelings of love.

“Before our feelings die, will you give me one final moment to remember?” Shusei asked.

Rimi raised her head and smiled faintly as she nodded.



Rimi had a good idea of what Shusei wanted to talk about—how what they felt for each other was inappropriate and that they needed to forget their feelings. It was something she had known already, and she understood that they had to do so, but it was still painful.

She had met Shusei when first coming to Konkoku. Being in an unfamiliar place and being treated coldly by everyone else had made her anxious, and Shusei had been the only one to speak kindly to her. That must have been when she first fell in love with him, and those feelings had only grown as she spent time alone with him. He was wise and kind, and Rimi loved him for it—so if their love was not to be, she at least wanted something to remember their time together. She felt that as long as she had one memory to bury in her chest, she

would be able to endure.

“Before our feelings die, will you give me one final moment to remember?” Shusei asked.

Shusei must have felt the same way as her. This made Rimi feel both happy and unbearably sad. Tears started welling up in her eyes, but Rimi still smiled faintly and nodded.

Shusei placed his hands on Rimi’s shoulder and gently pulled her toward him. He then placed a soft kiss on her forehead. All sound vanished from around them as if they were trapped alone underwater. Rimi’s chest hurt as she wished for this moment to last forever.



After a little while, Shusei removed his lips, ending the modest kiss. He looked away from Rimi and removed his hands from her.

The moment had passed in the blink of an eye, yet the sensation remained faintly on Rimi's forehead, an invisible mark left behind. She felt her feelings for Shusei permeate her body.

After a short silence, Shusei opened his mouth.

"This is it. Now our feelings for each other are dead," he said.

Shusei stood up from the sofa, but Rimi was unable to move. Joy and sadness filled her body at the same time, and she couldn't control her legs.

It's...over... She felt as though if she forced herself to stand up, she would collapse onto the floor. *It's all over...*

They both cared for each other, yet it had to come to an end. The unfairness of it all made Rimi want to cry. At the same time, she knew without a doubt that she couldn't escape her position. She felt as though her heart was being torn apart, and she reflexively placed both arms on her chest in an attempt to shield herself as she desperately stopped herself from crying out in pain.

It hurts... Lady Saigu, it hurts so much...

In difficult times, Rimi would always plead in her heart for her Saigu sister to save her. That way, the Saigu inside her would console and soothe her. Now, however, she could neither hear nor feel the Saigu anywhere. There was only one person who could ease her pain.

Master Shusei... Master Shusei...! She desperately wanted to beg the scholar in front of her for help—but she couldn't. She mustn't. The pain was indescribable.

Tama observed the scene from above with her blue eyes. She was motionless, and it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. She seemed somehow different from her usual pet-like appearance, instead having the dignified air of a divine beast. There was no telling what might go through a divine beast's mind.

Suddenly, a voice came from outside the door.

“Is anyone there?”

His Majesty?! Rimi froze.

“Please enter,” Shusei said, in as composed a tone as he could manage, though his expression was tense.

As cold air poured in from outside, Shohi entered the hall with Jotetsu in tow. Though surprised at the sudden visit, Shusei bowed, and Rimi forced herself on her feet and gave them an unsteady bow as well. Shohi seemed not to notice that Shusei and Rimi were acting strangely.

“Shusei, forgive me, but could you wait outside? You too, Jotetsu. I need to speak to Rimi,” Shohi said with no hint of concern in his voice.

Shusei could not very well turn down a request from the emperor, and he responded with a stiff voice.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Shusei said, and he left the hall together with Jotetsu.

The door closed, and the cuisinology hall became quiet.

“What is the matter? Are you not feeling well?” Shohi said, apparently noticing that Rimi was staggering slightly, and he quickly walked up to her and helped her back to the sofa.

“I just felt a bit dizzy. Thank you, Your Majesty,” Rimi said, bewildered by Shohi’s surprising kindness.

“Do not mention it,” Shohi responded, before falling silent.

“Um... So what did you need to talk to me about, Your Majesty?” Rimi asked, but Shohi turned his gaze to the ceiling, then the bookshelves, running eyes across the hall aimlessly. He seemed to be having a difficult time saying something.

Is something wrong?

Normally if Shohi had something to ask, he would simply summon Rimi to his room. Something must have happened for him to visit her instead. Rimi looked at Shohi with a puzzled expression as she waited for him to speak when he seemed to have made up his mind and took a deep breath.

“Very well, I shall say it,” Shohi declared as if to encourage himself when he suddenly knelt on the floor in front of Rimi and looked up at her.

“Your Majesty?!”

Rimi had no idea what was happening. She had never seen the emperor of Konkoku kneel before—in fact, it was unthinkable.

“What’s the matter, Your Majesty? You must be feeling unwell!” That was the only explanation she could think of as she lent Shohi her hand and tried to force him up. But Shohi took her hand with both of his and looked at her.

“I recall you said that you do not want to be touched by someone you do not love. Then I take it that me touching you like this must make you uneasy. However, I want to touch you,” Shohi said.

Rimi was shocked by Shohi’s earnest gaze. She had not the faintest idea what he was trying to say.

“Thus, I have a request for you. I want you to love me,” Shohi declared.

“Huh...?” Rimi was dumbfounded, and she could do nothing but blink.

“I love you. I desire you from the bottom of my heart. I want to make you my empress. Will you accept? Will you become my empress?”

Empress... Rimi finally understood what Shohi was asking, and she turned pale. *Me, the empress?!*

Rimi was so taken aback that she couldn’t speak. All she could do was tremble in fear. She had never even considered something so preposterous.

Shohi seemed to sense Rimi’s astonishment and fright as he gently let go of Rimi’s hand.

“Forgive me. I must have surprised you,” Shohi said.

“But...I’m a Wakokuan...” Rimi barely managed to reply, and Shohi hesitantly averted his gaze.

“That is not a problem. The moment you entered the rear palace, you became a Konkokuan. I will not ask you to make your mind up immediately, nor will I force you. You can take your time to decide, and even if you turn me down, you

have my word that nothing will change. You have nothing to fear.”

Shohi’s words were filled with compassion. This made Rimi happy, but she was still unable to think of what to say.

“That is all. I am leaving,” Shohi declared curtly as if to hide his embarrassment, and he left the cuisinology hall.

Rimi was left sitting alone on the sofa, unable to stand nor give Shohi a parting bow. She observed the emperor walk off in a daze.

III

Rimi would never have guessed that Shohi desired her to the point of wanting to make her the empress. Although he had touched her once before, Rimi had assumed that he had simply been attempting to distract himself. But it appeared that she had been wrong. Despite how much he had complained about her at every opportunity, he must secretly have cared for her deep down.

But...I...

Rimi instinctively touched the spot on her forehead that Shusei had kissed a moment ago.

Master Shusei...

She was so overwhelmed that all sounds around her seemed distant—but then she heard the sound of the door to the hall opening. Rimi sluggishly turned her eyes to the source of the sound to find a man clad in black standing at the doorway. It was the chancellor, Shu Kojin. Before she could even wonder what he was doing there, Kojin swiftly entered the hall and walked up to the sofa Rimi was sitting on, holding up his hand to indicate to her not to move. His fingers were long and slender.

“No need for greetings. Stay as you are, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. I imagine that it must be difficult for you to stand,” Kojin said.

He seemed to know something. His voice had a faintly ridiculing tone to it.

“His Majesty ordered you to become his empress, did he not?” Kojin continued.

“Yes...” Rimi answered quietly as she desperately fought to regain her senses from the shock. The fact that Kojin was here meant that something was afoot. If she didn’t stay on her toes, something frightening might happen. She felt as though she was in danger.

“Accept his proposal,” Kojin commanded.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m telling you to become the empress, princess of Wakoku. It’s not such a bad deal for you either, is it?”

Rimi struggled to understand Kojin’s motive behind suggesting this and alarm bells went off in her head. She had to be careful and not say anything rash.

“I’m still not sure. His Majesty said that I could take my time deciding,” Rimi said.

“Are you that in love with Shusei?”

Rimi was startled at how Kojin cut right to the chase.

“Are you so fond of Shusei that he is worth saying no to becoming the empress?” Kojin continued.

“There is nothing between Shusei and me,” Rimi defended.

“You do not need to hide it. I am well aware.”

Rimi was confused. The only person who knew about them was Jotetsu, but he was not the type of person to go around spreading rumors. Another possible explanation was that someone had seen them. Even if that wasn’t the case, perhaps someone adept at reading people had noticed—there was no lack of guardsmen or aides in the imperial palace. Someone might have seen the two of them acting intimate and realized what was happening.

Kojin bent down and whispered.

“If you love Shusei, then that’s all the more reason to become empress, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” Kojin said.

“What...do you mean?” Rimi asked in a trembling voice, and a faint smile appeared on Kojin’s lips.

“If there was something between the two of you, then Shusei would be too dangerous to let live.”

“On the charge of becoming intimate with a woman of the rear palace that His Majesty desires...?”

There were many cases of officials having been punished for becoming close with a concubine. Lucky ones were banished from the country together with the concubine—unlucky couples were hanged together.

Kojin chuckled. It was the first time Rimi had ever heard him laugh.

“No, his head will end up on a spike as the greatest criminal in the land,” Kojin said.

They’ll have his head on a spike...?

Having your severed head placed on a spike was an act that completely stripped the person executed of all dignity. Their head would be ridiculed by the masses while their body was fed to animals. It was a punishment reserved for bandits who attacked villages and killed a great number of people as well as those who attempted to overthrow the emperor. It was not a punishment to be used for something as simple as having a secret relationship with a concubine.

“Why would they do that?” Rimi asked. Kojin straightened his back.

“Become the empress, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” he ordered emotionlessly.

Meanwhile, the blue-eyed divine beast atop the beams quietly observed the humans arguing below.



“What did His Majesty have to talk to Rimi about?” Shusei asked Jotetsu as they walked down a cloister.

“Beats me,” Jotetsu replied brusquely, but it was clear to Shusei that he knew. When Shohi suggested visiting the cuisinology hall out of the blue, Jotetsu would have asked him why. That was the job of an imperially appointed military officer.

“It’s something you can’t tell me, then.”

It was unlikely that Shohi would attempt to do something to Rimi in the cuisinology hall in broad daylight—but the fact that the thought worried him made him feel as though he was beyond hope.

And we only just agreed to kill our feelings...

Jotetsu suddenly stopped dead in his tracks and turned around.

“Shusei,” he said, looking straight at the scholar, who stopped to meet his gaze. “Listen, Shusei. I’ll repeat what I’ve told you once before. Be more careful who you fall for. It’s time to forget about Rimi. If you don’t, your life will be at risk. We’ve known each other for a long time, so I’m saying this for your own good. Forget about her.”

Shusei gave a dejected smile.

“Yes, I suppose making a move on His Majesty’s favorite concubine could result in my being hanged,” Shusei said.

“It’s not that simple.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The bell signaling a final desperate attempt has rung.”

“What?”

“Your real fate has been set in motion. This is no time for you to be picking the most dangerous flower around.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Jotetsu let out a heavy sigh before quickly shaking his head.

“I probably shouldn’t have given you this warning to begin with. But I did because I feel sorry for you. Still, this is all I can tell you. I’ve been ordered not to get involved,” Jotetsu said. He then turned around and disappeared past the cloister.

Shusei remained in place for a while, pondering what Jotetsu had told him. Jotetsu had given him a similar warning before. At the time, he had thought that there might be something to Rimi, but he appeared to have been wrong. From how Jotetsu was speaking, there was not something to Rimi but rather

Shusei.

But what? And why?

Then, he heard someone walking up behind him.

“You are Shu Shusei, the cuisinology scholar, I presume?” a voice asked.

Shusei turned around and an old man came into view. He had a long, thick white beard and hair of the same color. His skin, however, was firm, and he stood straight.

“Have I met you somewhere before?” Shusei asked.

“No,” the man replied with a smile. “This is our first time meeting. I am Ho Neison.”

Shusei recognized that name as belonging to the previous Minister of Rites. Even following his retirement, many officials continued to respect him, and he was still ruling as the head of the royal Ho house. By the time Shusei started serving Shohi, Neison had already retired, so the two of them had never met. But the former minister was still occasionally mentioned in conversation.

“Forgive me, I did not recognize you. I hear about you often, Lord Ho,” Shusei said and attempted to bow, but Neison walked up to him and grabbed his hand, preventing him from doing so.

“No need, Shusei.”

Neison looked at Shusei. His gaze seemed somehow happy as though he was reminiscing fondly about something. He looked almost as though he had met an old friend and his intimate gaze confused Shusei.

“Lord Ho?” Shusei asked.

“Say, Shusei, a little bird told me that you desire a certain palace woman. Is that true?” Neison said.

“A palace woman?”

“Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu.”

Shusei must have been visibly startled, but Neison simply looked at him with the eyes of a loving father.

“Now, now. You desire her, do you not?” Neison said, and Shusei nodded repeatedly. Neison continued in a whisper. “Shusei, if you so wish, you can obtain that Lady of Precious Bevy—and through legitimate means, at that.”

Shusei stared back at the old man, surprised. Neison nodded as if reassuring him.

I can “obtain” Rimi? How? And through legitimate means, he says?

The sun became hidden behind clouds and snow started to fall. The snow quickly intensified, blocking Shusei and Neison from view like a white curtain. A blizzard would befall the imperial palace tonight.

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's Miri Mikawa.

This volume finally saw the appearance of Shusei's daddy, Shu Kojin, after only having been mentioned by name previously. He's not a particularly likable person, yet as the author, I couldn't help but think, "Aren't you happy that you finally got to speak, Daddy?" The story would have turned out pretty different depending on whether I decided to have him show up, but I'm very happy that I decided to include him. This was only possible thanks to the support of my readers. Thank you so much.

Now, as for the love triangle that got started in the last volume, I'm honestly surprised myself at how quickly it's developed. Now that I think about it, this is actually the first time I'm writing such an unambiguous love triangle, and it's both nerve-racking and amusing for me too. One of the biggest reasons that I'm enjoying putting Shusei in such an unfortunate position is that I just love how Nagi draws him.

I also brought back the four consorts for this volume. They really liven up a scene, which is tremendously helpful. I also happen to be rather fond of each of the consorts, and it's a lot of fun to write them. I'm hoping to put them to good use going forward too, though as always, I can't say for sure until I actually start writing. For example, Jotetsu didn't even exist at first—he just suddenly showed up as I was writing the first volume!

And so, as I'm writing, never quite sure what to do next, I'm extremely grateful to my editor for always talking to me so cheerfully. I can't say how much I appreciate all your pertinent advice, always putting me back on the right track. I couldn't do this without you! I'm sure I'll continue to cause you loads of headaches going forward, but I hope you'll stay with me.

Nagi, thank you again for your illustrations. In the last volume, you amazed me with how gorgeous yet distinct your illustrations were for the four consorts! Their hairstyles, clothes, expressions—I'm in love with it all. Every time I see

one of your illustrations I thank my lucky stars for having you on my team. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

Lastly, to my readers: Thank you for reading this book. I consider myself fortunate if I managed to entertain you for so much as a second. If you feel like it, I would love to see you again in the next volume.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 3

by Miri Mikawa

Translated by afm Edited by Nicole D'Andria

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